

## **Autism and Parenthood: A Comparative Analysis of *I Am Sam* and *Main Aisa Hi Hoon***

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### **Abstract**

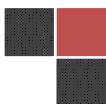
Disability has been variously portrayed in both Hollywood and Bollywood movies, with the ulterior motive of integrating the disabled into the social mainstream. For my study, I have chosen to focus on autism and how this particular disability is portrayed in two films—the American movie, *I Am Sam* (2001) and a Bollywood remake of it called *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* (2005). The same story is portrayed with the same theme, but, with different cultural contexts and in the hands of different directors, they develop interesting points of comparison. The idea of autism is integrated into a more generalized experience of parenthood, while addressing the doubts regarding heteronormative experiences of the disabled people. The optimistic views of the movie would present a positive scenario, but the way they achieve it is worth analyzing as certain pertinent social issues are also laid bare in the process.

**Keywords:** autism, disability, normal, parent.

*I Am Sam*, a 2001 movie released in America and its Bollywood remake *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* released in 2005, both revolve around an autistic parent and his struggle to bring up his child. The American movie stars Sean Penn in the lead role and is written and directed by Jessie Nelson. To prepare for his role, Sean Penn visited L.A. Goal, a centre in Los Angeles, for mentally handicapped people. *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* stars Ajay Devgan and is directed by Harry Baweja. What interested me about this topic was how the same story is taken with the same theme of autism and is depicted differently in the hands of different directors, with a different culture as the backdrop. Some things change while some of the important ideas and emotions stay on, despite the cultural difference between the two movies. Before I analyze, compare and contrast the two movies with the issue of disability in mind, I would like to trace a brief trajectory of movies based on disability in the American and Indian scenario.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson talks about the importance of recognizing the individuality of a disabled person. Irrespective of the kind of disability a person has, we tend to label him/her as disabled or crippled (and retarded if the disability is a mental one). But, if we take a look at the gamut of American movies centered on the idea of disability, the individual struggle and the individual nature of those disabled people make us realize that they are as varied as the non-disabled people. Movies like *My Left Foot* (1989), *Ray* (2004) and *Frida* (2002) portray the disabled person overcoming their disability to make a mark in the world. The cause of their disability varies- respectively, cerebral palsy, blindness and an accident, which turns Frida into a cripple from an able-bodied person. The story of Frida illustrates the point that critics like Rosemarie Garland Thomson often make, that disability is not necessarily a condition that people are born with, and anyone can become disabled at any point of time. The narratives of these films also display the image of the “supercrip” that Alison Harnett talks about, “When they are not inextricably linked with the dark side, disabled characters are often portrayed as remarkable achievers, 'supercrips' who, against all odds, triumph over the tragedy of their condition” (Harnett, 22). While this image garners overwhelming sympathy of the viewers, disability critics are skeptical of on the grounds that it can bring dissatisfaction to the disabled people, as they would constantly strive to be “cured” of their disability, instead of accepting it. In spite of such criticisms, such movies have become the space through which even a mute person can express the importance of individuality (as in the 1986 film *Children of a Lesser God*) and even someone who stutters can let us know that he has a voice of his own (as in the 2010 American movie, *The King's Speech*).

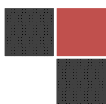
The idea of disability is not something new to Bollywood either. Old movies like *Koshish* (1972), *Sparsh* (1980), *Sadma* (1983) and *Khamoshi* (1996) have sensitively explored the life and problems of the disabled people. With movies like *Koi Mil Gaya* (2003), disability even started featuring in the so called “masala” or entertainment movies. It managed to pack in a degree of comedy despite showing the trials and tribulations of a disabled people. But, to get his happy ending, Rohit (in *Koi Mil Gaya*) had to rely on an alien to make himself normal. The movie, which was hugely popular, did not however provide a realistic solution or an ending. 2005 seemed to be *the* year in Bollywood for movies based on disability. Both *Iqbal* and *Black* came out that year, the former dealing with a mute boy and the latter with a visually challenged girl. Both champion over their disability to achieve their dreams and become successful in life. *Black* was also a movie that was inspired by the film, *The Miracle Worker*, based on Hellen Keller’s life and struggle, directed by Arthur Penn. So, American movies on disability had already started



influencing the Indian scenario. *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* came out in the same year and it was a direct remake of *I Am Sam*, with a few tweaks here and there in the plot to make it more suitable for an Indian audience. After that came the movie *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), which was an eye-opener regarding the lesser-known problem of dyslexia. *Barfi!*, which came out in 2012, is also an entertainment movie. It shows the relationship between an autistic girl, Jhilmil and a deaf and dumb boy, Barfi, who chooses Jhilmil over another non-disabled woman. *Hichki* (2018) is a relatively recent movie based on an aspiring teacher who is suffering from Tourette Syndrome (a neurological disorder), which is initially an impediment in her career. But she achieves her dream, showing that it is knowledge that matters in her profession and not her oddities. This is also based on an American movie *Front of the Class* (2008). Bollywood's penchant for "happy endings" has often encouraged an ambitious portrayal of the disabled person, where he/she ultimately triumphs over his/her disability, subscribing, yet again, to the representation of the "supercrip" figure. Movies like *Barfi!* raise another pertinent issue- is it possible for a disabled person to have a lasting relationship/bonding with a person without disability?

The movie *I Am Sam* answers this question with a vehement yes, as it movingly portrays the relationship between a father and his daughter. Sam is an autistic father with the mental capacity of a seven year old who has a smart daughter, Lucy. The problems begin when Lucy turns seven and refuses to learn anymore because she does not want to get smarter than her father. Ultimately, the court decides to take the custody of Lucy for the sake of her welfare. Sam has to fight against the court and takes the help of a top-notch lawyer, Rita. Rita is, in a way, is forced to take up the case pro bono as she tries to prove her kindness to her skeptical colleagues. The autistic man is forced headlong into the most complicated side of the normative world into the labyrinth of court and "unjust" justice. Rita, on the other hand, enters the non-normative world of Sam and learns more about parenting and love. They initially function as foils to each other as in her workaholic world, family and children hardly had a space, while for Sam, Lucy was his entire world. As the trials and the relationship between Sam and Rita progress, the way she changes as a person is shown beautifully. We meet her as a rather self-centered person, but in the course of the trial, she realizes, "Love is all you need". This is reminiscent of the 1988 movie *Rain Man*, where an autistic savant, Raymond, slowly changes the nature of his brother, Charlie, whom we initially meet as a self-centered man.

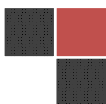
In the movie *I Am Sam*, it is apparently Rita who is working towards Sam's welfare, but she confesses to him in the end, "I worry that I've gotten more out of this relationship than you". So, what did she get from an autistic person who had initially seemed to be an irritating presence in her life? Is it the knowledge of how relationships work? The way Sam interacts with his neighbour his disabled friends and his daughter, teaches Rita that it is not normalcy that a person needs to develop a humane bond. It is worth noting here that Sam's friends are also disabled but through their different disabilities, the movie assigns them individuality. The scene where they all pool in and pay for Lucy's new shoes is a very heartwarming one. Chivers and Markotic state in their introduction to *The Problem Body*, "Frequently, a disabled body is represented as a metaphor for emotional and spiritual deficiency" (Chivers and Markotic 2). The representation of Sam and his friends challenges this notion, as they are shown as emotionally equipped to feel deeply, even more than what a "normal" person is capable of.



Sam is more of a friend to Lucy than a parent because they share the same mental age and that makes him such a great father. He satisfies all her childish curiosities to the best of his abilities. “Daddy, did God mean for you to be like this, or was it an accident?” asks Lucy as she tries to make sense of why her father is different from other fathers. For the first time, he does not have the answer; he does not understand what she means by “different”. In a classroom scene, where parents were listening to their kid’s projects, Sam is directly contrasted with other ambitious fathers. While he supports Lucy when she gets stuck, another father goads his child rudely when the boy cannot remember. Lucy is, in a way, happy that her father is different because nobody else’s father comes to the park like Sam does with her. Their moments spent together at the park are symbolic of the bond between them and form flashbacks when Lucy is taken away from Sam. She ultimately figures out that her dad is retarded, but she is defensive when her friend calls him that; “It takes one to know one”, she smartly retorts. She loves her father to the extent where she stops learning so that she could be like him, “I don’t want to read if you can’t”. When she is still in court custody, she screams out, “I don’t need any other daddy but him”.

Sam also shares a great bond with his group of disabled friends and his neighbour. He says that he has the “best friends in the whole world”. When we come to relationships, his autism becomes an ability rather than a disability (a notion that we also come across in the 1994 movie *Forrest Gump*) because it makes his love more genuine and innocent than ordinary people. This kind of bond cannot be forged by Rita with her family because she is always too busy with her work schedule. When she sees the relationship between Lucy and Sam, she realizes how far she has drifted away from her family and her only son. She could afford a big house and expensive gifts for her son, unlike Sam, but what he needed was her love and her time. This idea comes across strongly in the trials. When the judge tries to make Lucy understand that she deserves more than her autistic father can give her, she says, “I need his love”. During the trial, Rita says, that everybody must be thinking that “She (Lucy) is smart despite him (Sam), but she is what she is because of him”. Living with a father who is different, Lucy has developed empathy for all kinds of people.

The movie strongly questions prevalent notions of normalcy and disability throughout the court sessions. Rita asks a woman, who wanted Lucy in the court custody, that, while parenting, did she never have “moments where the task is so unbelievably challenging that you feel retarded, disabled in some way?” Though Rita had begun the customary questioning with dry rhetoric, we gradually see the emotions reflected on her face, as she realizes that even she had had those moments. She tries to establish that the job of parenting is not a cakewalk for anybody. If Sam would face problems in bringing up his daughter, so would other “normal” parents. When we first meet Rita, she seems to be the most normal person, when compared to Sam. But, as the movie progresses, we see that she has her own problems that she cannot solve in spite of being normal. She cannot make her son love her like Lucy loves Sam. There is a scene where Rita comes to Sam’s apartment at a point where they are almost losing the case. Sam screams at her, “You are born perfect...People like you don’t feel anything”. The phrase “people like you” completely subverts the idea of the disabled people as the “other”. From Sam’s perspective, it is people like Rita who is the “other”, unable to understand Sam’s problems. At this point, Rita breaks down and responds “People like me feel lost and little and ugly and dispensable. People like me have husbands screwing somebody else far more perfect than me. People like me have sons who hate them...Somehow I will never be enough”. Though she has never lost any cases, she admits that she has lost at life, “It is as

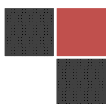


if every morning I wake up and I fail". It is clear that even she has the feeling of being imperfect and incomplete. Rather than living a problem-free "normal" existence, her problems are far more complicated than Sam's can ever be, as his world is a much simpler one. This shows us the pervasiveness of the concept of disability; as Rosemarie Garland Thomson puts it, "Disability, like gender and race, is everywhere, once we know how to look for it...to understand how disability operates is to understand what it is to be fully human" (Thomson 28).

This movie and also the Hindi remake of the movie show very beautifully the imperfections that we all possess, though we keep labeling specific people as "disabled". There are moments where we all feel disabled. Not only Rita, but Sam's neighbor and another woman who was in the witness box became emotional when it came to their families. Sam's neighbor cried at the mention of her father and the other woman cried at the mention of her son. They had also experienced moments of parental failure. Even in *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, the people who come to give witness for Neel's (the counterpart of Sam in the Hindi version) case, confess to their own stories of failure, under the interrogation. The uncovering of the "normal" people's weaknesses simply puts forth the idea that Sam should not be condemned simply because he is autistic. He has done his parental duties to the best of his abilities, as has all those other parents. Through Sam's trial, it is "normalcy" that is condemned, the normalcy that is apprehensive of Sam's parental failure simply because he is not "normal". But, what, then, is "normal"? The movie rejects the label altogether by problematizing the category. The only normal, natural thing in this movie is the love that Sam feels instinctively the moment he lays eyes on his newborn daughter, the love that all parents feel for their children, irrespective of whether their parenting is successful or not.

The vices of the normal world are also revealed through their irrelevance in Sam's world. When he does not comprehend the legal quagmire, it is a critique of the oppressive system that makes people toe the line. While preparing Sam for his trials, Rita asks him, "Can you grasp the concept of manipulating the truth? Not lying, just a few tweaks here and there? Sam answers firmly, "No". It is a critique of the system, where to prove you are right, you have to lie. Whenever somebody cries, Sam runs to comfort her, even in the formal space of the courtroom. Through his disability, he subverts the formal space of the courtroom by doing what his instincts tell him and not what the system demands of people. It shows how the world would be a more beautiful place if people would only act more from the heart and be less judgmental.

The Indian version of this movie makes some significant changes in the movie, but also somehow loses the original subtlety of the movie. The point of *I am Sam* was integrating Sam with the "normal" people by showing the "abnormalities" in the other people. But, *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* builds up Neel as a larger-than-life figure, who is popular in the entire town of Shimla for his friendliness. While *I am Sam* begins with Sam and his fastidious organization, *Main Aisa Hi Hoon* begins with Neel's daughter, Gungun, narrating the story. It immediately becomes the version of a sympathizing voice and the judgment is not left to the audience. Also, in the Indian scenario, the director finds it unacceptable for his protagonist to impregnate a homeless woman (as happens in *I am Sam*). As a result, he has to introduce the love story between Neel and Gungun's biological mother, Maya. Lucy's mother is never a presence in the movie, except the



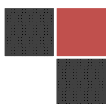
surrogate mother who comes in later on. But, in the Hindi version, Maya becomes important.

However, in both the English as well as the Hindi version, the story behind the autistic man getting a girl impregnated, remains mysterious. Sam is not even able to understand a hooker when he sees one. How did he comprehend sex? Even in the Hindi version, Maya suddenly finds herself pregnant. The role of Neel in this pregnancy is so unclear, that some have assumed that Maya was already pregnant when he met Neel and that Gungun is not Neel's biological daughter. Gungun's grandfather, Dayanath Trivedi, tries to convince the court that Neel has taken sexual advantage of her daughter. The lawyer, Neeti, immediately counters the argument saying that Neel, with his mental disability, is unable to take such advantages. She also suggests that probably it was Maya who took advantage of Neel. It is worth noting here that the sexual politics change simply because of Neel's disability.

Apart from changing the portrayal of some characters, the Hindi movie introduces a new character in the form of Gungun's grandfather. He becomes the clear villain of the plot as he arrives from London to take legal custody of Gungun. The issue of who should retain the custody of the young girl seems to be addressed differently in the two movies. In *I Am Sam*, the prosecutor turns to Rita and says, "This is an anecdote for you at some luncheon, but I am here every day. You're out the door, but you know who I see come back? The child." Robert Ebert, while writing his review on this movie, feels that he has a point. Even the surrogate mother complicates the situation by being a kind parent, somebody who would probably be helpful for Lucy. Robert Ebert says, "Every device of the movie's art is designed to convince us Lucy must stay with Sam, but common sense makes it impossible to go the distance with the premise. You can't have heroes and villains when the wrong side is making the best sense" (Web). Even Sam understands that Lucy needs a mother figure, even a "normal" figure in her life, which is made clear through the film's ending. The Hindi version, on the other hand, is rather absolute in its judgment. As the character of the hero and villain is more pronounced, there is no doubt that Gungun should be with her father. Dayanath is portrayed as a rich father, who had been so neglectful towards Maya that she ran away and took to drugs.

Apart from the normal-abnormal binary, the rich-poor binary also emerges in the remake. Neel's struggle against Dayanath also becomes the classic battle of the right against wrong, in which the right side is underprivileged. It puts forth the idea of how money can buy the law but only love can buy the person. Dayanath, in spite of being rich, could not take care of Maya. Neel, on the other hand, was taking the best care of Gungun with whatever he had. Like Dayanath, all the other "normal" people in the movie also suffer from their own problems, as in the original movie. Maya herself is a drug-addict and why she kept running away is not even clear to her. After she ran away, a conversation Neel has with his landlady, questions the tag of "normal". Trying to explain Maya's actions, the landlady tells Neel, "She had a lot of problems. She was not normal". Neel replies, "The Doctor says, even I am not normal". While he does not grasp the concept of normal at all, when the landlady uses the word "normal", she does not refer to disability, but psychological problems. Both the films then, in a way, primarily try to redefine the way we look at normalcy and disability.

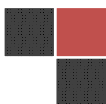
The names of both the movies convey the tone of assertion. The phrase "I Am Sam" keeps recurring throughout the movie. There is a scene where Rita is fumbling for a



word to refer to Sam, because what kept coming to her head were terms like “retarded” and “abnormal”. Unable to understand the implied offence, Sam simply suggests, “Call me Sam”. This sharply critiques the prevalent tendency of assigning adjectives and describing a disabled person rather than identifying him by his name. In *I Am Sam*, Sam wins in the end as a result of pure love and perseverance, even when the best lawyer fails him. In the Hindi version, however, the lawyer, Neeti, marries Neel to establish his right to keep Gungun with him. Neel has won the case but it is also the triumph of the lawyer who never loses, even if she has to marry her client for that. It is here that the remake destroys the practicality and subtlety of the original story. In the original story, Rita and Sam had shared intimate moments but that did not have any future for obvious, practical reasons. Even when Rita takes a divorce and continues to be in touch with Sam, hers and Sam’s worlds are distinctly different. Sam has only managed to make a change to her world, he into it. But in the remake, the director finds no other way to portray the transformation of Neeti than to marry her off to Neel. Gungun gets a mother and Neeti’s son gets a sister, but what about the marriage itself? A relationship that had begun with clear power dynamics cannot culminate into an unproblematic marriage. Roger Ebert questions the practicality of the ending of *I Am Sam*, “Every device of the movie's art is designed to convince us Lucy must stay with Sam, but common sense makes it impossible to go the distance with the premise” (Ebert, Web). He comments on how a loving and sensitive mother would have been much better for Lucy’s development than Sam’s influence. The remake’s ending provides the child with the influence of both, but in a way that throws an even bigger challenge to common sense. Dayanath’s lawyer tries to convince the court that “Life is not a fairy tale”. Harry Baweja seems to have gone a bit too far to prove him wrong.

If we consider Bollywood’s penchant for melodrama, the glaring modifications we find in the remake might not come as a surprise. Melodrama has been one of the most debatable cultural categories that has accumulated pejorative implications over the years but has also been integral to Indian cinema. In a bid to evoke strong emotions, we find a few scenes and characters overdone in the remake. As a natural counterpoint to realism, the heavy use of melodrama hampers the subtle beauty that we find in the original movie. The beautiful father-daughter relationship portrayed in *I Am Sam*, could not be developed equally well in the remake as the focus shifts to the figure of the “hero” and his larger-than-life representation. Bollywood loves its action heroes and even the depiction of Neel could not escape its overwhelming effects. The song and dance sequences, which are unavoidable in commercial Bollywood movies, seem jarring in a movie that is mostly a courtroom drama. Taran Adarsh in his criticism of *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, states, “Although the film does boast of a couple of hummable tunes [Himesh Reshammiya], you only wish that there were valid situations to fit in those numbers. Making the protagonist sing time and again takes away the seriousness from the film” (Adarsh, Web). Crisp dialogues that are the backbone of courtroom dramas get diluted into cliché phrases, which are essential to the melodramatic effect. While considering the two movies strung together on the basis of the same story and theme, we have to keep in mind the cultural differences between the two. The remake succeeds in playing out the same story in a completely different cultural background and in continuing the dialogue on disability, but we cannot help feel that it would be better off as a more faithful representation of the original.

On the whole, both the movies successfully question the label of disability and address the question of whether disability affects the parental qualities of a person. They aim at showing how the basic human instincts and emotions remain the same irrespective



of physical/mental limitations. The concept on which the movies are based is important to envisage the specially abled as a part of the social mainstream, playing out conventional family roles. In their own ways, the movies link disability and parenthood only to dissociate them by depicting that they need not affect each other. Disability is further integrated into the society as its exploration through these movies opens up a wider perspective and understanding of the societal set-up. This depiction finds an echo in Simi Linton's claim that studying disability is "a prism through which one can gain a broader understanding of society and human experience" (Linton 118).

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