Scripting Disability as the 'New' Bollywood: Pitching, reflecting, researching and negotiating

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the role of screenwriters and dialogue writers within the more extensive filmmaking process of New Bollywood. Drawing on ethnographic data, I foreground the creative tools, research and negotiations that prompt screenwriters to conceptualise and pitch character arcs that feature disability while positioning the writer as central to diversify film genres. By building on scholarship on production cultures, scripting and disability studies, I draw upon factors that navigate the writer's gaze from non-hereditary filmmaking networks to foreground disabilities in scripts and character arcs in efforts to strategise that they do not classify as reductive pathologisations and supercripping cultures. This article pays close attention to the conditions, identity politics, biases and situated vulnerabilities of writers that shape the assemblages of scripting disability rhetorics. The data from semi-structured interviews, with an explicit focus on three films and their script ideation and production pedagogies, illustrate these interlinkages and insights.

Introduction

In this article, I discuss screenwriters' ideationally change-driven, research-oriented and emotionally immersive approaches to scripting disability as a 'New' in Bollywood to foreground a screenwriter's role in filmmaking, which is often neglected in

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ethnographies of filmmaking. In addition, Bollywood's global reputation for relying on half-baked scripts, on-set improvisations by overlooking bound scripts or having no scripts at all (Sengupta, 2021), over-reliance on stars (Dudrah and Desai, 2008) and song and dance picturisation (Iyer, 2020; Morcom, 2017); dominate scholarship on Bollywood. In a way, it overlooks the multiple labour networks and below-the-line filmmaking practitioners in archival and contemporary scholarship (Mukherjee, 2020). Dickey (1993: 40) also notes that stars', director's and producer's names are given time as the movie begins, after which the credits 'fly by'. Even within contemporary post-production marketing and behind-the-scenes videos that feature the *making of* a film, I observed the scant public recognition of factors that precede shooting or take place off-site, which include researching, ideating, scripting and editing. This article offers insights into scripting journeys by highlighting the factors that aid and deter screenwriters in conceptualising and writing character arcs featuring disabilities in New Bollywood.

This article is a subset of a research project in which 55 filmmaking practitioners were interviewed, which included directors, editors, cinematographers, costume designers and prosthetic artists. In this article, I focus on 15 semi-structured interviews of screenwriters and dialogue writers, ranging between 80 and 120 minutes each, conducted over a year from August 2021 to 2022, that were recorded and transcribed.[1] All the respondents consented to their identity being disclosed. I deploy observational sketching (Heath and Chapman, 2020) to substantiate the central arguments. I chart out what motivates screenwriters to increasingly align towards scripting narratives that piggyback on mainstream stars to perform 'disabilities previously unheard of' such as Asperger's Syndrome, multiple sclerosis, polio and dyslexia, that was previously limited to 'physical disabilities such as deafness, muteness, blindness', barring few exceptions in the 1970s to 1980s (Prasad, 2013: 91). This is elaborated by discussing how screenwriters pitch, research and negotiate with big-budget production houses over screen ideas that promote a culture of 'narrative prosthesis' that showcases disability as central to the film's script (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000). Therefore, by highlighting the inner workings of 'scripting', I unpack the factors that prompted screenwriters to produce content featuring disabilities while contributing to the emerging scholarship in critical media industry studies (Havens et al., 2009) that addresses the significance of multiple practitioners' insights and interactions in filmmaking (Caldwell, 2020). In doing so, I demonstrate that there is a direct relationship between a screenwriter's identity as belonging to *non-hereditary filmmaking networks* and their emphasis on coining a change as 'New Bollywood' through a category of 'sensational body genres susceptible to attracting audience and intensified scrutiny' (Williams, 2012). In this case, foregrounding disability as a paradox and spectacle of resonance for its middle-class audience.

During an interview, screenwriter Mayur Puri explained that the film industry of 'New Bollywood' is broadly divided into two networks: the privileged hereditary screenwriters with predetermined filmmaking networks and the scattered non-hereditary screenwriters who need to establish their networks and strategise their recognition as innovative and issue-centric content producers. By clarifying that he belonged to the latter, he asserted, 'rejections of pitches outnumbered successes' and narrated instances where scripts were severely scrutinised for their inability to pitch novel and emotionally-charged content that could resonate with Indian middle-class audiences

(Personal Communication, 2021). Similarly, a majority of non-hereditary filmmakers described their screenwriting journey as a complex trajectory comprising frequent rejections and setbacks, which was often followed by numerous drafts of writing and rewriting to navigate through structural tensions to produce novel and relatable content.

For instance, screenwriter Amole Gupte explained his long stints of brainstorming in multiple writers' groups, acting in supporting roles and sticking around filmmakers to establish networks for nearly a decade while researching and fine-tuning *Taare Zameen Par* (transl. Like Stars on Earth, 2007) as a pitch he made to a big production house, namely Aamir Khan Productions. With that, he exclaimed, 'They immediately grabbed it due to the novelty of presenting learning disabilities' (Personal Communication, 2022). Previously (Punathambekar, 2013: 75) highlighted the inclination of big production houses in Bollywood post-2000 to capitalise on by integrating new-age screenwriters and directors who are 'unafraid to raise issues that are less discussed' and 'push the envelope thematically'. I advance these arguments to contextualise the reasons behind big production houses lobbying for a *writer's gaze*, the integration of a screenwriter's perception of disability and the strategies they deploy to articulate disability in New Bollywood.

In disability studies, media industries and distinctly Bollywood, have predominantly been critiqued for popularising social models of disability as pathologised victims who are punished for past sins (Ghai, 2012), cause of disequilibrium (Pal, 2013), integrated as a tokenistic 'feel-good' diversity (Friedner, 2017) and reinforce 'othering' with potential to affect public perception of disability (Dawn, 2014). They reveal the politics of representation by mapping contemporary trends that treat films as it is, a final product made available for scrutiny. Therefore, this article must be distinguished from the above literature as it focuses on the ideation, making and processual journeys of disability by demonstrating its interlinkages with scripting.

I go beyond critiquing or even dissecting disability representations by discussing scripting disability as a process that is constantly produced through situations, practices, biases, research and negotiations confronted and imagined by a screenwriter. In doing so, I foreground the screenwriter who strategises pitches of screen ideas, models character arcs and protagonists' emotional impulses and iconographic journeys in ways that stages disabilities beyond reductive and pathologising representations while echoing the sensibilities of an average Indian viewer and the 'globalized Indian middle-class that forms the majority of audience' (Kaur, 2002). I build on the thematic frameworks of screenwriting as processes reliant on a collaborative assembly (Maras, 2009; Wolff, 1981) and a writer's emotional disposition and internalisation of social and cultural expectations while scripting (Batty and Taylor, 2021; McNamara, 2018) a sociocultural artefact (Batty and Baker, 2017). In this case, it is producing disability as a way to foreground 'genre diversification in New Bollywood' (Gopal, 2011) by restructuring film form and industry practices based on retrospective accounts of a screenwriter's social world, experiences and emphasis on challenges they confronted upon entry.

I draw inspiration from Ganti's (2012), Punathambekar's (2012) and Mukherjee's (2020) approaches to grounded fieldwork that unpacks the deployment of subconscious events, accidental encounters and strategies adopted in screen production to diversify the content presented on-screen. I advance these arguments in the context of non-hereditary

screenwriters and dialogue writers who keep configuring new ways to produce narratologies and iconographies of disability. This way, the article explores how screenwriters express their research, reflexivity, resonance, relatability, developmental biases and materiality of disability production through pitching and scripting processes—in fruition, situating screenwriting as assemblages of 'becoming' (Deleuze, 1989) that are constantly evolving while navigating their way through complexities and ambiguities in processes of collaborating in filmmaking. To explain this further, I focus on three films with character arcs featuring a disabled protagonist and the journeys of their screenwriters/dialogue writers: polio in *Omkara* (2006) and its screenwriter Abhishek Chaubey, multiple sclerosis in *Guru* (transl. teacher, 2007) and its dialogue writer Vijay Krishna Acharya and dyslexia in *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) and its screenwriter Amole Gupte. In doing so, I highlight the subversive practices, epistemological limits such as pre-censoring[2] screen ideas, creative negotiations, shifting modalities in packaging a collaborative rhythm that appeases filmmaking practitioners and audiences, self-reflexive and pedagogical tools they adopt to pitch, write and structure a layout for the plots and protagonist's journey by upholding disability as the critical vantage point.

Scripting an 'in-between' grammar

The 1990s Bollywood films have often been critiqued for their over-the-top narratological conventions by overlooking marginality while popularising scopophilia and bourgeois sentimentality that exoticises foreign locations and lifestyles (Dwyer, 2014; Mishra, 2002). Much has been written about New Bollywood, critiquing and lauding its representation of glocalising India to feature contemporary women-centric cinema with storylines foregrounding women's disability, same-sex desires, among others (Anwer and Arora, 2021 ed.). Unlike most scholars, Ganti (2012: 366) drew upon the reasons governing the difference of 'Old' and 'new' by quoting screenwriter-director Abhishek Chaubey who narrated that 'changing social and class backgrounds of filmmakers are the key players in constituting the new Bollywood as he pointed towards his own middle-class background, college degree and parents' professional and occupational backgrounds—a bank manager and a schoolteacher as providing him with the cultural capital to navigate the industry'. It also signified an inclination of production houses to reorient the narratologies of Bollywood by relying on scripts and screenwriters who exemplify what Gopal (2011) described as the 'conjugality' of the social film and *masala*[3] film genre that caters to Indian middle-class sensibilities and consumerist preferences. In a way, New Bollywood reclaiming spaces meant restructuring filmmaking practitioners' preoccupations, re-modelling phenomenology, pedagogy, aesthetic conventions and narrative tropes to make fundamental changes to content quality.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi also publicly announced this 'change' on 19th January 2019 while giving the inaugural speech at the National Museum of Indian Cinema, highlighting the contribution of Bollywood as an influential format of storytelling that motivates its youth (assuming below the age of 35), that accounts for 70% of India's population (Thussu, 2013: 158) to reimagine India as a site of multiple identities, dialects, complex subjectivities and cultural diversity. Modi explained that 'filmmakers now coming from tier 2 and 3 cities in India' govern the ideological change. He lauded

their vision for articulating a 'cinema culture with problems and solutions' that echoes stories from small towns.[4]

Inadvertently, his speech pronounced a need to overthrow hereditary filmmaking networks and implied that non-hereditary filmmakers as 'changemakers' should replace it with their gaze, identity politics and socioeconomic positionality as an 'outsider'[5] rooted in small-town sentimentalities and sensibilities of the Indian middle-class as the new norm of filmmaking that is grounded in everyday corporeality of the Indian majority. Thus, making them plausible catalysts for changing cinematic grammar while introducing disability rhetorics as an underlying theme. During my interviews, I observed a similar emphasis on *change*, signalling that the vision of 'New Bollywood' competes with the diverse content the audience has been exposed to over the past decade. On probing further, I realised that screenwriters expressed their aversion, cynicism and insistence to dissociate from the 1990s Bollywood. They asserted that their upbringing in families that had nothing to do with filmmaking and anecdotes from a childhood spent in cities and towns distanced from the film industry's functioning as reasons governing their vision, aesthetic orientation and affective programming of character arcs.

By calling the 1990s as the 'old' Bollywood, Ganti (2012: 199) described the trajectory of hereditary filmmakers as 'children trained by immersion' and critiqued its 'lack of depth in character arcs, almost predictable narrative sequences and no emotional engagement with unrelatable and unrealistic content'. I take a different turn by delving into the nuances of scripting and demonstrate that positing disability as the centrifuge to changing cinematic grammar and etymologies began with critiquing the predominant vision of hereditary filmmaking networks.[6] It had been over a decade since Ganti (2012) interacted with Abhishek Chaubey, who also in the meanwhile wrote, co-wrote, directed and co-directed numerous screenplays. While discussing his debut as a screenwriter retrospectively, he pronounced that the premise of dialoguing the 'new' in Bollywood emerges from criticism, skepticism and urgency to distance and dissociate from 'old Bollywood'. In his words,

> Bollywood cinema is too generic, lacking an individual's voice . . . formulaic . . . within a very rigid structure . . . too troppy, . . . I wanted to expand the parameters a little bit . . . but I am not an arthouse filmmaker . . . My cinemas had a bit of everything from the mainstream with something *new*, *my voice* in showing disabilities and the India I came from, . . . region and dialect I am familiar with, the Northern belt and the disabilities I saw around me. (Personal Communication, 2022)

Chaubey's testimony reflected an assertion of 'the writer's world' as an embodied experience that 'pre-determines an idea' (Maras, 2009: 8) and mediates as tenets in positing a New Bollywood through topographies of multiple filmmaking practitioner's gaze and their 'cine-ecologies' while filming India (Mukherjee, 2020). In doing so, making disability the loci of realism, resonance and reflexivity for audiences affective engagement. It hints towards a non-hereditary screenwriter's efforts to echo the sensibilities of novelty with affective geographies of region-centrism that can counter and even overthrow the utopianism of elite architectures, commodity fetishisation and glorified preoccupation with material acquisition. These underlined multiple aspects of the writer's writing

process that aligns towards 'reinvention' by breaking away from preexisting structural configurations in framing character arcs and narrative rhetorics. Therefore, reinstating a 'writer's gaze' in proposing a strategic layout and convergence of processes that feature disability as built from a writer's familiarity and subconscious orientation.

As Chaubey highlighted the need for changing Bollywood, he frequently argued how Bollywood in the 1990s 'suffered', making the writers fundamental to reorienting its thematic predicaments. Chaubey's claims also reflected the role of a writer's identity and cataclysms of their everyday surroundings as crucial to building the ontology and epistemology of novelty in cinemas. It further communicated a writer's urge and ability to grasp and assemble affectorial experiences through principles organising 'numerous forces of resonances across cross-hatching series of events' (Rai, 2009: 214). This makes writers instrumental agents who strategise to articulate different investment tactics and corporatisation logics within dynamic media economies while catering to the 'Indian middle class' whose interests are fragmented, uncertain and evolving (Athique, 2009).

Further indicating that New Bollywood lies 'in-between', symbolising a melting pot of arthouse cinema's thematic preoccupations and mainstream commercial cinema's stylistic configuration with efforts to remain grounded in showcasing textures of socio-political, region-specific and culturally-distinctive frames of glocalised India. It meant envisioning screen ideas that avoid the polarities of filmmaking cultures by selectively adopting thematic orientation and research-mandated processes from arthouse cinemas and camouflaging the subject's seriousness with some allegories, tactics and cues from commercial filmmaking processes in Bollywood. To demonstrate his stance, Chaubey explained the screenwriting process of *Omkara* (2006), one of Vishal Bharadwaj's trilogy of Indianised adaptations of Shakespeare's literary works. It was adapted from *Othello* and set against the gritty, chaotic and turbulent backdrop (Gruss, 2009) of Meerut, a tier 3 city in Uttar Pradesh, North India. Chaubey asserted that the premise of the filmed space was shortlisted by the director and co-screenwriter Vishal Bharadwaj, who wanted to capitalise on his childhood memories and familiarity with the context of communal riots, gangsters, goons and politicians to navigate the screenplay.

On that note, three screenwriters, including Chaubey, brainstormed screen ideas and executed their research of laying out the script's foundation through a month-long stay in Meerut. They drew upon accidental interactions to roughly strategise the central character arcs before casting its stars. A noteworthy experience they implied served as a cultural intermediary included visiting a local prison and interacting with a high-profile gangster/politician whom Chaubey asserted 'treated them as if he invited guests to his house for tea and snacks'. Chaubey laughed upon recalling the incident, conveying it as an emotion they unanimously decided to recreate in their script. He provided similar claims and anecdotes from everyday life in Meerut, community engagement practices and typicality of gestures that highlighted the region's uniqueness and memorability during their visit, which facilitated in shaping the enigma of the screenplay and the characters they wrote.

To explain the nuances of disability characterisation, Chaubey broke down the character arc of Iago, addressed as *Langda Tyagi*, due to his polio-infected crippled walk. At the outset, his name signified and deduced two primary identity markers: a limping man and his upper-caste status. As we discussed the character's name *Langda Tyagi*, he narrated how it was inspired by Bharadwaj's childhood acquaintance, '*Langda Rathi*',

who had polio and '*Tyagi*', from his college hostel's name. In this matrix of screenplay production through a protagonist's naming and use of familiar places, two kinds of histories emerged as relevant: 'history of the positions they [screenwriters] occupy and the history of their dispositions [screenplay they write]' (Bourdieu, 1993: 61).

Chaubey also asserted, 'Langda Tyagi's physical disability was just a stylistic addition as he was relatively empowered due to his caste identity. We introduced the concept of social disabilities for men belonging to a lower caste'. Chaubey's claims offered a critique of the singularity and reductionism in disability representation, insisting on how they demonstrated disability and its intersectionality with caste, where caste superseded the other identity markers. Additionally, the term 'social disability' puts forth a novel dimension in the scripting approach that challenges supercripping cultures and points towards disability, intersectionality and an affirmative strategy to go beyond pathologising narrative rhetorics. For these reasons, writing the nuances of the writing process becomes a focal point of discoursing scripting as an assemblage that underlines how much of a writer's subjective orientations, empirics of priority, biases and proclivity for crafting an 'in-between' grammar (represented in Figure 1) materialises as screenplays.

Moreover, Chaubey was persistent in expressing his desire to write commercial cinemas, which implied curating an ensemble star cast to increase viewership. Regarding casting, Chaubey asserted his reluctance to having Saif Ali Khan perform as a small-town politician/goon with polio, who chews *paan* (tobacco-infused betel nut leaf commonly classified as a marker of uncultured plebians, nuisance makers in North India), communicates in Khariboli, a subset of Hindi and dominant dialect in Meerut and lecherously stares at women. He quoted Khan's filmography in performing as 'an urban cool dude, English-speaking, city-bred, metrosexual, wealthy, playboy' and off-screen star

Figure 1. The many roles played by a non-hereditary screenwriter to construct disability in an 'in-between' film genre.

persona as a charismatic leading star from a hereditary filmmaking family, who is also the current Nawab of the princely state of Pataudi (a royal legacy having erstwhile linkages with Afghanistan during British rule). Upon reinstating these claims, Chaubey recalled expressing his apprehension to Bharadwaj. However, Bharadwaj insisted on capitalising on that sentiment in casting, modelling and packaging stardom to attract audiences he preempted would be similarly intrigued to see Khan as configured differently as a glocalised antagonist with polio, a role that visually and narratologically strikingly contrasts his filmography, persona and general demeanour.

Overall, suggesting how the performative attributes of disability, the impetus of narrative conceptualisation and socio-material rhetorics in building character arcs rely on multiple market-driven factors to facilitate mass appeal that includes casting stars in unprecedented and unimaginable roles. To date, Bharadwaj is acknowledged and remains relevant as an auteur in New Bollywood for the successful casting of *Langda Tyagi* that 'awakened the actor in Saif Ali Khan' (Sharma, 2020). Khan's casting marketed Bharadwaj's proclivity towards framing region-centric localisation of India that is currently a common content-creator approach in platform production while catering to urban and Indian middle-class consumers (Mehta, 2020). Thus, making it a medium to showcase the incorporation of digital platform-led industrial, managerial and spatial logics (Mohan and Punathambekar, 2018) into filmmaking practice. These deliberate tools of spatial programming and commercial interventions by casting stars for mainstreaming diversity in film cultures demonstrate how the narrative preoccupations and the layering of character arcs posited that the format of scripting disability thrives on assembling an 'in-between' grammar. One that relies on multiple permutations and combinations to camouflage the revolutionary impulses of the disability, making it a complex phenomenon of balancing a writer's subjective history and research practice while weighing it against a market orientation so it classifies as a palatable, comprehensible, emotionally engaging, relatable and mainstream commercial film.

Scripting from familiar emotions

My first observation during interactions with screenwriters and dialogue writers in New Bollywood was that the terms 'screenwriting', 'script writing', 'screenplay writing', 'scripting', 'writing', and 'storytelling' are used interchangeably by signalling their roles in tasks that remain backhands and communicate the relative invisibility of the 'writer and the writer's world' in emerging scholarship on production cultures. Furthermore, while interacting with screenwriters who capitalised on their identity as the 'struggling fan-as-worker' (Mukherjee, 2020: 270) and Indian middle class status, I inferred that they established that facet of their identity as paramount to assure their credibility and willingness to empathise with writing character arcs showcasing disability. To further elaborate on this phenomenon of drawing from familiar settings and modelling emotions about the character arcs of disability, Vijay Krishna Acharya, the dialogue writer of *Guru* (2006), spoke at length about Vidya Balan's role as Meenu, through her journey with multiple sclerosis. He introduced the discussion with the story behind naming her *Jalkukri*, which lucidly translates as a term of endearment to denote an attention-seeker. He stated that the name was subconsciously derived from a vivid recollection of his

wife's childhood stories, wherein her grandfather would call her *Jalkukri* when he wanted to reprimand her.

Besides that, he asserted that director Mani Ratnam was intrigued by the 'relative absence of multiple sclerosis in public dialogue'. Upon researching its case studies, gaining foundational knowledge on the causal factors, and discovering the subject's lack of recognition in popular culture, Ratnam was convinced to configure a woman with multiple sclerosis as having a significant character arc in a supporting role. In terms of building its emotional nuances, Acharya indicated that he was inspired by a college friend, a woman with multiple sclerosis, who helped him model the epistemological disposition of its character arc and strengthen the intricacies of its affective rhythm building. In this way, he explained the importance of first-hand encounters of manoeuvring her wheelchair in inaccessible public spaces, observational and referential anecdotes on how she expressed her ambitions, confronted challenges with her feisty personality, and repressed her desires due to public perceptions of women's disability. Thus, a culmination of these experiences served as fodder for the character arc he was keen to build through dialogues, monologues and song picturisation.

While recounting experiential accounts of navigating the narratological, lyrical and aesthetic typicality, Acharya asserted feeling more strongly for Meenu's character arc, which he indicated was an ongoing process of reorientations where he often intervened to make changes at the film sets. In a way, underlining that disability constructivism is characterised by modelling and re-modelling based on a writer's justifications to augment their belief system through the emotional journey they write, making the 'process of scripting fluid' (Millard, 2014: 97). This also indicated that the empirics of direct observational anecdotes and scripting from self-reflexivity facilitated the dialogue writing process. To assert how they [Ratnam and Acharya] wanted to configure a shift from the archetypical character arcs featuring disability, Acharya commented,

> We never looked at her with modelling pathos; she is the chirpiest, . . . we can be a mirror to the society. . . Wet saris are Bollywood's way of eroticising women; we used that in . . . *Barso Re* (transl. Let it Rain) featuring an able-bodied Aishwarya Rai dancing, and again the rain is critical in *Shauk Hai* (transl. I have desires) featuring Vidya Balan on a wheelchair when she . . . kisses. (Personal Communication, 2022)

Acharya's claims foregrounded a strategic convergence of dialogue writing as a process where a writer's developmentalist biases frame the epiphanies of narrative tropes and spatial formations. He demonstrated that although he did not have a disability, his stance of positing a change from the convention by using the illustration of 'rains as a backdrop and wet saris as tools for eroticizing women' (Dwyer, 2000) emerged from observing lived experiences and self-reflexivity. It motivated him to deploy saris and the rains as instrumental agents and metonymic devices for crafting an ideational reinvention of configuring a woman's disability. By doing so, Acharya also expressed his efforts in bridging the polarities of able-bodied and disabled women by highlighting the undergirds of similarities in their dramaturgical structuring and intricacies of song picturisation.

This description also outlined that a narrative, lyrical and spatial logic is built from a writer's urgency to articulate a change from dominant connotations of women's

disability that pathologises bodily difference through a 'cripping narrative' (McRuer, 2006) that desexualises women with disability. It demonstrates a writer's strategised efforts to exemplify a new cinematic grammar by using commercial tools like song picturisation, monologues, spatial formation, lyrics and costumes, which could innovatively suggest the core theme and the writer's sentiment about women's disability and their sexual agency but also not make the ideology and its affective programming an overpowering statement for its audiences. Therefore, signalling that a writer's task involves strategising a middle ground by striking a balance with precision in communicating the narrative crux of the change while camouflaging the seriousness of the subject's thematic orientation and emotional intensity, so it classifies as a mainstream commercial cinema.

While discussing these matters, Acharya emphasised his intervention through Balan's monologue, highlighting her 'aspirations as a wheelchair-using woman who wants to experience romance and companionship'. He indicated that the packaging of the monologue conveyed the narrative crux of the protagonist's journey, which made it his way of governing a change in portraying the women's disability rhetoric that went beyond stereotypical and reductive representations of disability. This implied that the nuances of her projected vulnerability and moral dilemma were a glimpse of how he reflected on his friend's lived experience as a woman with similar desires as an able-bodied person. In this way, he wanted to demonstrate a writer's positionality in highlighting the women's disability voice as one who wants to be heard as a woman with sexual desires to be 'gazed at' while avoiding stares that pity (Garland-Thomson, 2009) and classify them as 'socially construed misfits' (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Ghai, 2002) and 'dehumanized grotesque spectacles' (Garland-Thomson, 1997) within the dominant narrative taxonomies of Bollywood's crip culture (Sinha, 2020). A culmination of these factors echoes a writer's standpoint, conscious and calculated efforts to replace conventional tropes of disability figuration and 'narrative prosthesis' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000) by packaging a woman with a disability performing as a supporting character in the screenplay.

In a nutshell, assembling these interconnected social events and anecdotes from revisiting a writer's familiar surroundings and emotions symbolises a writer's subconsciously strategised approach to scripting disability. It indicates that disability can be integrated into storytelling with a writer's vision to blur the divide between able-bodied and people with disabilities. These factors highlight the role of writers in reinventing the ways of seeing disability based on their subjective understanding of suggestively overthrowing the dominant paradigms and stereotypes about disability. In fruition, a writer mediates as a key figure who introduces the foundational layout and ways of pitching differences in cultural production, boosts the diversification of characters and their situated vulnerabilities on-screen, models the 'new' affective rhythms of representation and navigates the allegorical lexicons of character arcs from the nascent stages of the filmmaking process.

Scripting with creative negotiations

Taare Zameen Par (*TZP*) could be categorised as mainstream in foregrounding a child's life and learning disability, both of which made it a novel theme to be tackled by contemporary screenwriters in mediating resonance among audiences. While discussing the

nuances of scripting disability in films as messages that capitalise on an audience's emotional connection, the screenwriter Amole Gupte asserted and lamented,

> It was commercially successful, . . . used as a ready retina by the UNESCO and schools for counselling parents about learning disabilities . . . I should have thought it's very celebratory, taken all the accolades, but I don't. . . . I really, really screwed up! (Personal Communication, 2022)

The screenplay revolves around the tyranny of Ishaan Awasthi, an 8-year-old school-going boy with a flair for painting, who consistently fails in his school examinations and, as a result, is sent to a boarding school as a punishment by his parents. However, the sudden shift in surroundings amplifies his inability to comprehend with the school's curriculum and makes him a misfit who also gives up painting. After the film's interval, the art teacher, Aamir Khan, enters, narrowing down dyslexia as the root cause of Ishaan's poor academic performance. After realisation, Khan takes on the responsibility of tackling and 'rectifying the disability issue for a happy ending' (Pal, 2013) by tutoring Ishaan through music and art education, alphabet writing systems using specially-tailored fonts with increased spacing to strengthen Ishaan's grasp over word analysis, reading and spelling. Over a turn of events, Ishaan regains his confidence and wins a coveted art competition. He also shows a significant improvement from his past academic records. Beyond foregrounding a dialogue on children's learning disabilities, focusing on dyslexia, the screenplay also tapped into practices of corporal punishments, addressed the importance of healthy teacher-student relations and drew upon diverse forms of bullying by peers.

Apart from breaking box office records and being declared commercially successful, the film capitalised on its 'social relevance', especially by introducing dyslexia as an underlying theme while featuring the child's gaze as central to the protagonist's emotional journey. For these reasons, the film won three National Awards and was nominated as India's entry for the Oscars. In 2008, the International Dyslexia Association hosted a special screening of *TZP* in Seattle, Washington, which was followed by a standing ovation (IANS, 2008). Drawing from the film's central message, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) also reworked its educational policy frameworks to integrate children with dyslexia in schools. They acknowledged the filmmakers for simplifying awareness generation on diverse learning disabilities as a film, which they used to counsel parents (Shukla, 2019) and recorded a rise in parents reporting their children as dyslexic (Lakshmi, 2008). Quoting similar reasons, Gupte acknowledged how the film's popularity instantaneously peaked his recognition as a writer who accords a keen eye for highlighting children's voices and the problems they confront. However, he aggressively asserted that the screen idea and initial script he proposed and wrote 'over seven years of researching' and called 'High Jump' drastically differed from the screenplay of *TZP* (represented in Figures 2 and 3).

During our interaction, he quoted 'reading Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurusawa's autobiography', titled *Something Like an Autobiography*, which inspired him to write a story that 'celebrates children with disabilities'. Then, establishing the premise of introducing a children-centric screenplay as creative and noteworthy, he mapped his

Figure 2. High Jump: The screenwriter's imagination of the screenplay's happy ending.
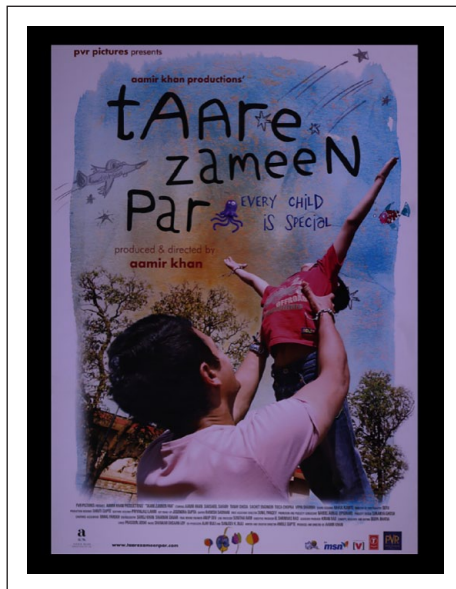

Figure 3. Taare Zameen Par's poster: How the screenplay finally materialised.

immersion into researching and closely observing dyslexia. One such format relied on frequently conducting theatre workshops in special schools, namely *Tulips* and *Saraswati Mandir*. The rapport Gupte built with its children and staff later mobilised the crew's entry to the school and made them feel comfortable about shooting some songs on their premises while featuring their students. In describing such instances, he expressed the importance of networks he built through community-level interactions that enabled him to cross-verify facts and understand the particularities of behavioural characteristics. He further indicated how such accidental encounters, insights from field practitioners and participant observations in special schools broadened his approach towards writing disability. Among them, he quoted educationists like 'Medha Lotlekar, who heads two special schools' counsellors, 'Kate Karava, Head of the Maharashtra Dyslexia Association' and parents of children with disabilities, as sources that enhanced his awareness about disability and influenced the development of character arcs of the script he envisioned and wrote. By making these claims, he implied undergoing rigorous training and developing diverse research methods for strengthening his knowledge about children's lives and dyslexia, in particular.

He repeatedly affirmed that finessing these processes could strengthen his emotional impulse to feel like the characters he writes about and their battles with self and society. He claimed 'feeling responsible' to frame character arcs that integrate the challenges he observed and insights he derived from the field. This meant strategically incorporating diverse subjectivities and experiences to situate the efficacies of a protagonist's journey in script development. On that note, he asserted, 'interacting with over 200 Ishaan Nand Kishore Awasthi's before bringing their attributes into one'. On explaining the nuances of his journey of scripting *High Jump* as a vision that he claimed would 'integrate children with disabilities into the mainstream with Ishaan re-entering the system upon succeeding to cross the high jump bar himself with no star rectifying him'. He reinstated that such a screenplay and character arcs of a child's learning disability would challenge the 'language of disability that classifies a disabled protagonist into a sick and handicapped role' (Longmore, 1985) and defy the 'rhetorics of supercripping mediatised cultures' (Schalk, 2016). With a visible frown and regret, Gupte repeated, 'But, I failed and lost to a star!' (represented in Figure 4).

This revelation outlined various contours involved in scripting disability under the nexus of filmmaking being a collaborative process with a screenwriter having to review, incorporate and rewrite based on the director and the 'star's' directives. His assertion exemplified a critique of the systemic preoccupation with 'stars as a branding affect' (Rai, 2009: 15) while piggybacking on them for assembling an abstraction of new functionalities that wants to capitalise on introducing disability as a spectacle, subject and distinct genre. However, in doing so, making the roles played by stars in addressing disability as central to moulding a script's narrative crux, affective pedagogies and the intricacies of its ideological orientation. Gupte's experience demonstrated the possibilities of a writer being situated as a compliant figure who despite their ethical principles and best intentions is expected to reorient and tailor the script to accommodate multiple insights into filmmaking.

Beyond highlighting these facets, his persistence on how he was 'left with no choice of going ahead with his idea' revealed scripting disability as an ongoing process of
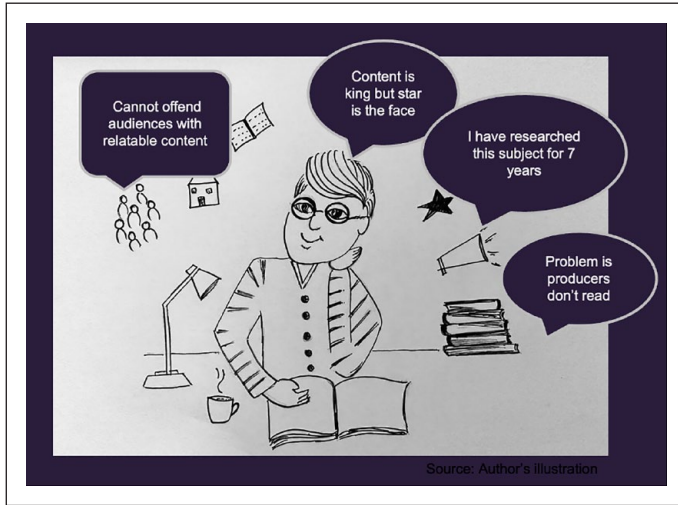
Figure 4. A non-hereditary screenwriter's relatively marginalised position, vulnerability and dilemma while scripting disability.

inventing and reinventing by channelling and accommodating creative disagreements. Such a thought situates the star body as the driver of emotional impulses, critical to structuring the biopolitics of disability from the practitioner's perspective and shaping the metanarrative that can establish audiences' connection by incentivising starring disability as the spectacle. A collaborative design by filmmakers to deploy a pragmatic approach to attract viewership then makes scripting a dynamic process of negotiations led by on-set improvisations and shifting codifications, wherein a star intervenes to 'rectify disability as the saviour' (Shakespeare, 2018), outweighs the screen idea, script and standpoint initially upheld by the screenwriter, who can be compartmentalised as a marginalised voice in commercialising content. In a way, such 'strategic hybridity of production houses in post-2000 Bollywood' (Punathambekar, 2013: 75) also demonstrates the relative absence of power among screenwriters in foregrounding their vision of disability.

While narrating his journey, Gupte often used words like 'disappointment', 'guilt' and 'helplessness' to convey his pent-up emotions of not succeeding in pursuing the pitch, script and screenplay he had envisioned, researched and written. The series of events echoed how a screenwriter's vision is considered a 'work in progress', subject to change due to intervening variables and possibly placed in the backseat during the film's shooting. Thus, classifying a screenwriter's vision of disability as a tentative framework in need of accommodating other collaborators as they come on board.

For these reasons, I call it a historic moment. It was the first time a screenwriter publicly called out the functioning of the film industry as 'hierarchical' and presented claims to highlight the filmmaking process as an assembly of events that subsumed a writer and their screen ideas. To do so, a screenwriter offered a critique of stars in dictating a script's shift of focus, ideological orientation and narrative structuring by overshadowing a writer's standpoint in the film production process. This meant a screenwriter's position

of vulnerability and reduced creative hegemony emerged from the fear of their perspectives being overlooked, superseded and sometimes rejected, looming the possibility of a writer being treated as replaceable mid-way through a film's shooting. Second, his testimonies indicated a longstanding and tumultuous journey of screenwriting, wherein a screenplay can vastly differ at every stage, right from the time a script's pitch is made, sequences are shot and reassembled post-shooting to configure and capture the intensities of disability. In totality, it reflected a writer's reduced bargaining power upon submitting a script for shooting, mired by a camouflaged protocol of complying with the higher authorities, namely the producer, director and star. Rose (1999: 5) called them 'macro actors', asserting how they dictate the modalities of culture production and Saha (2012) described such practices of commercialising minority through stereotyping as an inevitable strategy to mainstream creative industries.

Gupte's explanation was a rarity and echoed the sentiments of helplessness that other screenwriters also expressed in relatively toned-down allegories and anecdotes. Alongside, it implies the 'absence of writer's credits' for successful films while quoting instances of being blamed for a film's commercial failure (Deshpande, 2022). In terms of pitching and scripting disability, they indicated their relative position of heightened vulnerability, primarily due to the inability to work parallelly on multiple scripts and often confining themselves for 'two years as an average time' to ideate, research, structure, and write multiple iterations of a script that promises to foreground disability. It implied a screenwriter's precarious position of placing all eggs in one basket yet remaining unsure of a script's materialisation from a screen idea to a screenplay, fearing the culture of on-set improvisations and an underlying expectation of rewriting, restructuring and reorganising during the film's shooting. While narrating such episodes, they often asserted that the core element of conceptualising a film's textures relies on the writer's propensity to curate a change by scripting a disability that requires emotional immersiveness and prefiguring audiences to ensure that they are not offended by the blatant exhibitionism of disability rhetorics.

At the outset, it might seem that a non-hereditary screenwriter's credibility of establishing prominence relies on their potential to craft original screen ideas, configure disability as the change and capitalise on their ability to foreground disability as relatable content for audiences, making it a spectacle echoing resonance. However, over the course of interactions, I realised that an added dimension of accommodating creative disagreements and subjective orientations of its primary stakeholders on the treatment of disability as a script's guiding principle plays a crucial facet of the scripting process. This further extends into a screenwriter's responsibility to avoid backlash from audiences through goal-oriented encoding that only attracts conversations about a change in cinemas, moderating the affective programming, tactfully packaging and manoeuvring cinematic grammar in presenting disability.

Some, like Gupte, were upfront in announcing their frustration in explaining the perils of scripting disability by lamenting the loss of creative freedom due to hierarchised filmmaking units, calling out the subtle and more explicit ways in which the writers' voices are suppressed when it came to materialising the screenplay. Others used subtle cues to assert their precarious position of having almost negligible bargaining power and expectation of complying with producers due to the absence of risk-taking

privileges that came with belonging to non-hereditary filmmaking networks. In this process, they echoed sentiments of leaving a screenwriter's role as one that goes beyond the act of writing. This indicated serving as the moderators of a screenplay by pre-censoring ideas across its various stages of filmmaking through self-reflectivity, research and answerability to the community, often leading to their instincts being nullified within filmmaking collaborations.

This section focused on the various strategies of knowing disabilities that are applied for developing a screen idea, affective geographies in pitching, and building the nuances of a protagonist's journey. However, a quintessential characteristic of scripting relies on factors beyond a screenwriter's control, emphasising a screenwriter's tenacity to negotiate through creative disagreements while avoiding the dangers of offending filmmaking practitioners and audiences. Therefore, making the writing process a perpetual state of assembly and reassembly, highlighting a screenwriter's role of adapting, moulding and weighing the pros and cons in shaping the tones, textures and nuances of defining disability.

Conclusion

This article studied the three stages of scripting disability as a change introduced in the conventions of the 'New Bollywood' by investigating narratives of screenwriters who strategise, accommodate and incorporate assemblages and processes that echo resonance, relatability and originality for audiences. It was an attempt to underline an 'in-between grammar' that emerges from the relationship between a screenwriter's lived experiences, anecdotes from self-reflexivity and research practices while making disability central to their pitches and scripts. In doing so, they foreground 'disability as a filmed spectacle' (Kuppers, 2017), wherein a screenwriter selectively adopts from real-life and camouflages the seriousness of its revolutionary impulses in corporealities of mainstream cinema.

At the same time, it indicates the processes of encoding disability through scripting involves thinking, researching and storyboarding that is considered 'dynamic and ambiguous' (Taylor and Batty, 2016) while wrestling with diverse consumption patterns and formats of content represented on-screen since mid-2000s. The use of the term 'writer's gaze' is deliberate to reinstate the narratives of non-hereditary screenwriters of New Bollywood who deploy strategies to economise on their Indian middle-class identity to selectively extract, reflect, pitch, research and strategise screenplays to foreground disability in characterisation as a way to compete with the diversity of internet-circulated content, platform production and television industries. In a way, it advances Ganti's (2012) ethnographic insights on the subjective orientations and corporatisation logics of hereditary filmmakers who capitalise on their familiar worlds and flamboyant fetishisations in producing utopia.

Lastly, the study demonstrated that the inclination of non-hereditary screenwriters to write disabled characters relies on factors beyond the physical act of writing. As I show, a screenwriter's tasks extend into their ability to affiliate with stars and big production houses, strategically integrate multiple and contrary standpoints, remain relevant in

filmmaking networks and balance filmmaking practitioners' and audience demands. Therefore, this article offers an insight into reading films through the writer's journey, situating the writer's role as the affective engine that builds a screenplay's narrative crux, and models its ways of reifying and refashioning disability as a paradox of novelty and diversification in New Bollywood.

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Notes

1. Remote fieldwork was conducted due to international travel bans from Singapore to India in August-November 2021, followed by the second wave of Covid-19 in India. In-person interviews were replaced with extensive semi-structured and follow up interviews.
2. In a 2016 interview, filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt addressed the fear of running into trouble with the Censor Board of Film Certification, India. To avoid its intervention, most filmmakers remove content that might be categorised as objectionable since pitching and scripting. See: https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/pre-censorship-is-a-reality-today-mahesh-bhatt-3013300/ (Accessed 27 March 2023).
3. A spice mix and has commonly been used to describe commercial Bollywood.
4. Speech available at: https://youtu.be/Y2q8b_qdjiA (Accessed 17 January 2023).
5. The term 'outsider' has been used to critique nepotism, where hereditary filmmakers, godfathers and social networks support debuts and constant work in the film industry. See: https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/screen/the-outsiders-in-bollywood/ (Accessed 2 December 2022).
6. For instance, Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham (2001) was a big production house-funded multistarrer with many hereditary filmmaking families collaborating over portraying grandness and opulence through song picturization and shootings in multiple foreign locations. Without such pre-existing capital and social networks, a film of that magnitude would be nearly impossible for a non-hereditary screenwriter. See: https://www.outlookindia.com/art-entertainment/karan-johar-no-one-can-afford-a-movie-like-kabhi-khushi-kabhie-gham-today-news-213001 (Accessed 2 January 2022).

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