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PERANBU: A SCHOLARLY ANALYSIS OF REIMAGINING DISABILITY  
AND CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES IN TAMIL CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the portrayal of disability in the Tamil film "Peranbu" (2019), directed by Ram. By analyzing the film's narrative, characters, and visual style, this study explores how disability is depicted in contemporary Indian cinema. The analysis incorporates disability theories and Jack A. Nelson's stereotypes to critique the film's representation of the protagonist and her experiences. Through this examination, the paper aims to provide insights into the cultural and social implications of the film and its contribution to the discourse on disability in Indian cinema.

**Keywords:** Disability Representation, Tamil Cinema, Social Model of Disability, Film Analysis, Cultural Narratives, Inclusive Society

Introduction

The representation of disability in Indian cinema has historically been fraught with stereotypes and misrepresentations. Often, disabled characters are depicted either as objects of pity or as sources of inspiration for non-disabled characters. This trend reflects broader societal attitudes towards disability, where individuals with disabilities are either marginalized or expected to 'overcome' their impairments to be considered valuable.

In Indian cinema, and particularly in Tamil cinema, the portrayal of disability has gradually evolved. Earlier films like "Koshish" (1972) depicted the struggles of a deaf-mute couple, while more recent films like "Taare Zameen Par" (2007) and "Margarita with a Straw" (2014) have offered more nuanced depictions. In Tamil cinema, films like "Deiva Thirumagal" (2011) and "Mozhi" (2007) have attempted to present disability with sensitivity. However, the representation is still limited and often falls into common tropes and stereotypes.

"Peranbu" (2019), directed by Ram, is a significant film in this context. It tells the story of a single father, Amudhavan, and his daughter Paapa, who has cerebral palsy. The film stands out for its sensitive and realistic portrayal of disability, avoiding many of the clichés that have plagued similar narratives. This paper aims to explore how "Peranbu" represents disability, focusing on the film's

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narrative structure, character development, and visual style. By applying disability theories and examining Jack A. Nelson's stereotypes, the paper seeks to understand the film's contribution to the discourse on disability in Indian cinema.

Disability studies provide a lens through which we can understand the representation of disability in media. Key theories include the social model, which focuses on societal barriers and attitudes, and the medical model, which centers on the individual's impairment. The cultural model explores how cultural narratives shape our understanding of disability.

The social model of disability emphasizes that disability is not just a result of individual impairments but is largely constructed by societal barriers and prejudices. This model suggests that by removing these barriers and changing societal attitudes, many of the difficulties faced by disabled individuals can be alleviated.

The medical model, on the other hand, views disability primarily as a medical issue that needs to be treated or cured. This model tends to focus on the individual's impairment and often leads to portrayals that emphasize pity or inspiration.

The cultural model of disability looks at how disability is constructed and represented in cultural narratives. It explores how these narratives shape our understanding of disability and influence societal attitudes.

Jack A. Nelson identifies several stereotypes of disability in media, such as the supercrip (a disabled person who overcomes extraordinary challenges), the pitiful victim (eliciting pity), the evil avenger (a disabled person seeking revenge), and the saintly sage (a wise figure). These stereotypes often reduce complex experiences to simplistic narratives.

Research on disability representation in Indian cinema shows a history of marginalization and misrepresentation. Although some films have started to challenge these narratives, many still rely on stereotypes. Tamil cinema, with its rich history and diverse audience, provides a unique context for examining disability representation. Films like "Deiva Thirumagal" (2011), which tells the story of a man with the intellectual capacity of a child fighting for custody of his daughter, and "Mozhi" (2007), which features a hearing-impaired woman as a central character, have been praised for their sensitive portrayals.

In addition to these films, the broader landscape of Indian cinema includes movies like "Black" (2005), which tells the story of a deaf-blind woman and her teacher, and "Barfi" (2012), which features a mute and deaf protagonist. These films, while sometimes criticized for their melodramatic elements, have played a role in bringing disability issues to mainstream audiences. However, the need for authentic and diverse representations remains critical.

## Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods to analyze "Peranbu." The film's narrative structure, character development, and visual style are examined through film analysis, narrative analysis, and thematic analysis. The framework combines disability theories and Nelson's stereotypes to offer a comprehensive understanding of the film's portrayal of disability.

The narrative analysis focuses on the story's progression, character arcs, and key themes. The film analysis examines the use of cinematic techniques, such as cinematography, editing, and sound, to convey the experiences of the characters. The thematic analysis explores the broader cultural and social implications of the film's representation of disability.

Primary data for this study is drawn from the film itself, while secondary data includes scholarly articles, reviews, and theoretical texts on disability representation in media. This multi-faceted approach ensures a thorough and nuanced analysis of "Peranbu."

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## Narrative Structure and Character Development:

"Peranbu" follows the story of Amudhavan (played by Mammooty), a single father who returns from abroad to care for his daughter Paapa (played by Sadhana), who has cerebral palsy. The narrative is divided into twelve chapters, each exploring different aspects of their lives. This chapter-based structure allows the film to delve deeply into various dimensions of disability and caregiving.

Paapa's characterization is central to the film. Her experiences, struggles, and moments of joy are portrayed with sensitivity and realism. The film avoids sensationalizing her condition, instead focusing on her individuality and humanity. Amudhavan's journey as a father is equally important, depicting his growth from frustration and helplessness to understanding and acceptance.

## Scene Analysis

- **Opening Scene:** The film opens with Amudhavan returning to India and trying to connect with Paapa. This scene sets the tone for the film, highlighting the initial distance and misunderstanding between father and daughter. Amudhavan's frustration and helplessness are palpable, and the film does not shy away from showing the difficulties of caregiving. The raw emotion in this scene establishes the realistic and unvarnished portrayal of disability that "Peranbu" aims to achieve.
- **School Rejection:** In one scene, Amudhavan tries to enroll Paapa in a school, only to be rejected due to her disability. This scene underscores the societal barriers faced by disabled individuals and their families. The school's refusal highlights the lack of support and understanding for disabled individuals in the education system. This rejection is not just a plot point but a critique of systemic failures and societal attitudes that marginalize disabled individuals.
- **Beach Scene:** A pivotal scene in the film takes place at the beach, where Amudhavan and Paapa experience a rare moment of joy and freedom. This scene is visually striking, with the expansive sea symbolizing both the challenges and possibilities of life. It also marks a turning point in Amudhavan's understanding of Paapa's needs and desires. The beach, with its vast and open expanse, contrasts with the confinements that Paapa faces in her daily life, symbolizing a fleeting sense of liberation.
- **Climax:** In the climax, Amudhavan decides to move to a secluded area to better care for Paapa. This decision reflects his growth as a character, from seeing Paapa's disability as a burden to understanding her as a person with unique needs. The film ends on a hopeful note, emphasizing the importance of acceptance and love. This conclusion is not just about Amudhavan's personal journey but a broader commentary on societal acceptance and the need for inclusive environments.

## Use of Disability Theories

The social model of disability is evident in "Peranbu" through its depiction of societal barriers and attitudes. Paapa's challenges are often exacerbated by the lack of accessibility and societal prejudices. For example, scenes where Amudhavan struggles to find a school that will accept Paapa highlight how societal structures fail to accommodate disabled individuals.

The medical model is also present, particularly in how Paapa's condition is discussed and treated. However, the film does not reduce her to her medical diagnosis; instead, it presents her as a whole person with unique needs and desires. The medical consultations in the film often serve as moments of tension, contrasting with the more holistic care that Amudhavan learns to provide.

The cultural model of disability is explored through the film's portrayal of Paapa within the context of Tamil culture. The film challenges traditional narratives that view disability as a curse or burden, instead offering a more nuanced and empathetic perspective. By situating Paapa's story within

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specific cultural contexts, the film highlights how cultural beliefs and practices influence the experience of disability.

### Scene Analysis

- **Medical Examination:** In a scene where Paapa undergoes a medical examination, the film critiques the medical model by showing the clinical and detached approach of the doctors. This scene contrasts with Amudhavan's growing emotional connection with Paapa, highlighting the limitations of the medical model in understanding the lived experiences of disabled individuals. The examination room's cold, sterile environment underscores the impersonal nature of the medical model.
- **Societal Reactions:** Various scenes depict societal reactions to Paapa's disability, from neighbors' gossip to strangers' stares. These reactions reflect the societal barriers that Paapa faces, reinforcing the social model of disability. The film critiques these attitudes and calls for greater empathy and understanding. The contrast between supportive and hostile reactions illustrates the spectrum of societal attitudes toward disability.

### 3. Jack A. Nelson's Stereotypes

"Peranbu" both reinforces and challenges Nelson's stereotypes. Paapa is sometimes depicted as a 'pitiful victim,' particularly in scenes where her vulnerability is emphasized. However, the film also portrays her strength and resilience, challenging the notion that disabled individuals are helpless or dependent.

Amudhavan's character development can be seen through the lens of the 'supercrip' stereotype. His dedication to caring for Paapa and his eventual success in finding ways to support her can be interpreted as a form of heroism. However, the film avoids glorifying his efforts, instead presenting them as a natural part of his love for his daughter.

The film also challenges the 'saintly sage' stereotype by depicting Paapa as a complex individual with a range of emotions and experiences. She is not reduced to an inspirational figure; rather, her humanity is central to her portrayal.

### Scene Analysis

- **Struggle and Resilience:** In several scenes, Paapa shows resilience in the face of her challenges, such as trying to communicate despite her speech difficulties. These scenes challenge the 'pitiful victim' stereotype by highlighting her agency and strength. Paapa's moments of determination, such as when she tries to express her desires or assert her independence, showcase her as an active agent in her own life.
- **Father-Daughter Bond:** The evolving relationship between Amudhavan and Paapa challenges the 'supercrip' stereotype. The film presents their bond as one of mutual growth and learning, rather than a one-sided narrative of overcoming adversity. The scenes of everyday life, where Amudhavan learns from Paapa and vice versa, emphasize the reciprocity in their relationship.
- **4. Visual and Cinematic Techniques**

The visual style of "Peranbu" plays a crucial role in its representation of disability. The film uses close-ups and intimate framing to create a sense of empathy and connection with Paapa and Amudhavan. Cinematography emphasizes their physical and emotional landscapes, drawing viewers into their world. The use of natural light and soft focus in intimate scenes enhances the sense of realism and immediacy.

Editing and music are used to evoke specific emotions and highlight key moments in the narrative. For example, scenes of Paapa's struggles are often accompanied by somber music, while moments of connection between her and Amudhavan are underscored by more uplifting melodies.

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This use of sound and image creates a rich, emotional tapestry that enhances the film's portrayal of disability.

Symbolism and metaphors related to disability are present throughout the film. Water, for example, is a recurring motif that represents both cleansing and drowning, freedom and confinement. These dualities reflect the complex realities of living with a disability, capturing the contradictions that Paapa and Amudhavan face.

### Scene Analysis

- **Close-Up Shots:** The film frequently uses close-up shots of Paapa's face to capture her emotions and expressions. These shots create an intimate connection between the audience and Paapa, fostering empathy and understanding. The close-ups also highlight the nuances of her physical condition, making the audience more aware of her experiences.
- **Use of Water:** The recurring motif of water is used to symbolize the dualities of Paapa's experiences. In one scene, Amudhavan takes Paapa to a river, where they experience a moment of peace and freedom. However, the same motif is used to convey a sense of isolation and struggle, reflecting the complex nature of living with a disability. The visual contrast between calm waters and turbulent waves metaphorically represents Paapa's fluctuating experiences.

### 5. Cultural and Social Implications

"Peranbu" offers a critical perspective on cultural narratives about disability in Indian society. By focusing on the everyday experiences of a disabled individual and her caregiver, the film challenges dominant stereotypes and promotes a more inclusive understanding of disability.

The film's portrayal of disability has the potential to influence public perceptions, encouraging empathy and awareness. By presenting Paapa as a fully realized character, "Peranbu" invites audiences to see disabled individuals as equals, deserving of respect and understanding.

However, the film also highlights the need for systemic change. The barriers that Paapa and Amudhavan face are not just personal challenges but societal failures. "Peranbu" calls for greater accessibility, better support systems, and a more inclusive society that values all its members.

### Scene Analysis

- **Public Spaces:** Scenes that depict Paapa and Amudhavan navigating public spaces, such as schools and hospitals, highlight the systemic barriers they face. These scenes critique the lack of accessibility and support for disabled individuals in Indian society. The physical obstacles in these environments symbolize the broader societal challenges that need to be addressed.
- **Community Interaction:** The film portrays various interactions between Paapa and members of the community, from supportive neighbors to prejudiced strangers. These interactions reflect the diverse attitudes towards disability in Indian society and underscore the need for greater empathy and understanding. The supportive characters serve as models for positive engagement, while the prejudiced ones highlight ongoing issues.

### Comparative Analysis with Other Films

To further contextualize the representation of disability in "Peranbu," it is useful to compare it with other films in Tamil and Indian cinema. Films like "Deiva Thirumagal" and "Mozhi" have been previously mentioned for their attempts at sensitive portrayals. "Deiva Thirumagal" focuses on a father's fight for custody of his daughter, emphasizing the emotional and legal battles faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. However, it also falls into melodramatic tropes at times, which "Peranbu" largely avoids.

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"Taare Zameen Par" (2007) and "Margarita with a Straw" (2014) are notable in the broader Indian context. "Taare Zameen Par" explores dyslexia through the eyes of a young boy, while "Margarita with a Straw" focuses on a young woman with cerebral palsy exploring her sexuality. Both films were praised for their nuanced portrayals but also faced criticism for elements of inspiration porn.

### Scene Analysis

- **Contrasting Representations:** Comparing scenes from "Peranbu" with those in "Taare Zameen Par," where the protagonist's artistic talent becomes a focal point, reveals differences in narrative focus. "Peranbu" centers more on daily lived experiences and emotional nuances, whereas "Taare Zameen Par" aligns more closely with the supercrip stereotype through the protagonist's exceptional abilities.
- **Sexuality and Independence:** "Margarita with a Straw" and "Peranbu" both addresses themes of sexuality and independence. In "Peranbu," scenes where Paapa expresses her sexual curiosity are handled with sensitivity and without judgment, challenging cultural taboos. This contrasts with "Margarita with a Straw," which also explores similar themes but through a more explicit lens of self-discovery and rebellion against societal norms.

### Implications for Future Research

The analysis of "Peranbu" opens several avenues for future research. One potential area is the exploration of audience reception and its impact on societal attitudes towards disability. Understanding how different demographics perceive the film can provide insights into its effectiveness in challenging stereotypes and promoting empathy.

Another area for research is the comparison of disability representation across different regional cinemas in India. While Tamil cinema has its unique cultural context, examining how other regional cinemas portray disability can offer a broader understanding of the cultural narratives at play.

Finally, investigating the role of filmmakers and actors in shaping these narratives can reveal the intentions and challenges behind bringing such stories to the screen. Interviews and behind-the-scenes analyses can shed light on the creative processes and ethical considerations involved in representing disability in cinema.

### Conclusion

"Peranbu" is a significant film in Tamil cinema, offering a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of disability. Through its detailed characterizations, sensitive narrative, and thoughtful visual techniques, the film challenges dominant stereotypes and promotes a more inclusive understanding of disability.

The analysis reveals that while "Peranbu" occasionally reinforces certain stereotypes, it also subverts and challenges them, offering a complex and humanizing depiction of its disabled protagonist. The film's impact on public perceptions and cultural narratives underscores the importance of diverse and accurate representations in media.

Future research could expand on this study by examining other films in Indian cinema that address disability, exploring how different cultural contexts and genres influence the representation of disabled individuals. Ultimately, "Peranbu" serves as a powerful reminder of the need for stories that reflect the full diversity of human experiences, including those of disabled individuals. Through its sensitive portrayal, "Peranbu" not only contributes to the discourse on disability in Indian cinema but also calls for a more inclusive and empathetic society.

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