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Beyond the Margins: Redefining Fat, Queer, and Neurodivergent Visibility in Contemporary Indie Cinema

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Abstract

Mainstream cinema has long marginalised fat, queer, and neurodivergent individuals by reducing them to simplistic tropes—comic relief, tragic victims, or inspirational figures designed to support normative protagonists. These representations often mirror and perpetuate prevailing standards of thinness, heterosexuality, and neurotypicality, so fostering social stigma and the marginalisation of actual experiences. Conversely, the independent film has developed into a significant counterspace where these identities are authentically, agentively, and profoundly reinterpreted.

This study analyses how modern indie films contest simplistic narratives by focusing on fat, queer, and neurodivergent people as protagonists whose identities are complex rather than tokenised. This study conducts a meticulous examination of films including *Dumplin'*, *Real Women Have Curves, Pariah, Mosquita y Mari, Tangerine, Keep the Change* and *A Brilliant Young Mind*, emphasising the employment of innovative narrative techniques—such as non-linear storytelling, realism, and community-based casting—to portray underrepresented experiences with sophistication. This study utilises critical frameworks from fat studies, queer theory, and disability justice to examine how Indie film subverts conventional norms and promotes more inclusive cultural representations. It contends that independent cinema functions as both a criticism of mainstream media and a progressive platform for representation that transcends stereotypes to express individuality. Through the acceptance of complexity and intersectionality, independent film is transforming public perceptions of underrepresented identities and broadening the scope of narrative.

Keywords

Fat Representation, Indie Films, Intersectionality in Cinema, Neurodivergent Representation, Queer Narratives.

Introduction

Society is made up of people who vary greatly in their ideas, looks, identities, beliefs, sexual preferences, and cognitive styles. Every community, across all cultures and countries, has natural diversity. Still, even with this natural diversity, prevailing society standards tend to dictate an ideal—an anticipated standard for how one should look, think, act, and live. Often

favouring certain bodies, identities, and ways of being while marginalising others, these standards produce tight definitions of acceptability. People who do not fit these socially constructed ideals often face criticism, exclusion, or pushback. Systems of dominance and marginalisation start to function in this disparity between society expectation and lived reality.

Undoubtedly, cinema plays an instrumental role in shaping narratives, entertainment, and creative expressions. Cinema has become a fundamental part of human society since its introduction more than a century ago, shaping our ideas, values, and viewpoints. Academics, researchers, and politicians have paid great attention to and worry about the impact of movies on society.[1]

Often by means of restricted and stereotyped representations that reinforce current social norms, mainstream cinema since its inception has shaped beliefs, ideas, values along with cultural and societal norms that serve as powerful media for cultural narrative, aesthetic expression, and ideological dissemination. Embedded in traditional Hollywood, Bollywood and regional cinema, fat, queer, and neurodivergent characters have been marginalised in narrative, depicted as comic relief, tragic characters, or inspiring tools for able-bodied, cisgender, and slim heroes. Often simplistic, these depictions rely on stereotypes that ignore personal experiences and reduce complexity. Whether through the overweight character focused on weight loss, the LGBT character whose story ends in loneliness or death, or the neurodivergent person depicted as either a burden or a genius, mainstream movies have preserved a legacy of invisibility and distortion.[2]

The depiction of fat, queer, LGBTQ characters are in sharp contrast to the well-established and accepted characters that are representative of heterosexual, capitalist and patriarchal viewpoints, preferences and societies. Alternatively, independent film has emerged as a crucial centre of narrative defiance—a field where creators are gradually prioritising authenticity above financial viability. Independent films sometimes operate beyond the ideological and financial constraints of conventional production, therefore enabling more daring and inclusive stories. By putting minority identities at the narrative front—not as simple symbols or secondary characters but as fully developed protagonists with complex inner lives, multiple goals, and overlapping identities—these films challenge conventional cinematic paradigms. Independent films provide a platform from which to reexamine the portrayal of fatness, queerness, and neurodivergence on screen—not as challenges to be overcome but as identities to be understood and celebrated—by means of realistic, character-driven stories.[3]

In this paper we will first explore historical tropes in mainstream cinema, followed by an analysis of how independent films reframe fatness, queerness, and neurodivergence through narrative and formal techniques. Drawing on critical media studies, queer theory, and

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[1] K. Ranaut, A. Sharma, D. Padukone, United Nations, R.M. Lal, and B Lakhendra, 'Cinema and Society: Shaping our Worldview Beyond the Lens: Investigation on the Impact of Gender Representation in Indian Films,' *Gender Bias Without Borders,* 2014, https://geenadavisinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/cinema-and-society-investigation-of-the-impact-on-gender-representation-in-indian-films-cover.pdf.

[2] Shailee Koranne, 'Fat representation onscreen is finally starting to improve — but there's still a long way to go,' CBC (7 September 2023), https://www.cbc.ca/arts/fat-representation-in-film-and-tv-survival-of-the-thickest-1.6980072.

[3] Kerith Putman, 'US Independent Film Audience and Landscape Study,' Reports and Papers, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, 1 November 2024, https://shorensteincenter.org/us-independent-film-audience-landscape-study/.

disability justice, we contend that independent films not only subvert damaging stereotypes but also establish new paradigms of representation.

Fat representation in Indie cinema

Historical tropes in mainstream films

Mainstream film often depicts overweight individuals as caricatures, using their physiques for comedy, sympathy, or cautionary narratives. These representations perpetuate fatphobia by characterising fatness as a moral deficiency, indicative of sloth, gluttony, or insufficient self-discipline. Obesity is often seen as a transient impediment to be 'rectified' by weight reduction to achieve affection, success, or societal validation. Mainstream narratives sometimes dehumanise overweight folks by failing to portray them as multifaceted human beings, instead perpetuating restrictive beauty ideals that associate thinness with discipline, allure, and moral value. While such condescending representation is justified on the pretext of providing an opportunity to steal the limelight, the work of scholars Steven Cooper and Adrienne Harris, 'Film Review: Real Women Have Curves,' argues such representation reduce fat people to mere 'proxies' and negative assumptions that leads to marginalisation and estrangement, advocating for non-normative embodiments.

In Hollywood, characters such as obese Amy in Jason Moore's *Pitch Perfect*[4] and Rosemary in Bobby Farrelly and Peter Farrelly's *Shallow Hal*[5] are crafted for comedic effect, while obese bodies are shown as intrinsically unattractive, with the transition to a slimmer physique presented as a means to attain confidence and affection.[6] Bollywood often reflects these troubling representations, shown by characters such as Sweetu in Nikkhil Advani's *Kal Ho Naa Ho,*[7] and Laddu in Karan Johar's *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham,*[8] who are mocked for their size and solely function as sources of comedic relief. Even in a film such as Sharat Katariya's *Dum Laga Ke Haisha,*[9] which seeks to confront fatphobia, the narrative focuses on the husband's hesitancy to embrace his wife due to her weight, indirectly perpetuating the idea that overweight women must 'merit' adoration via personal development or change.[10]

These portrayals perpetuate societal stigma by promoting the notion that overweight persons are less competent, less affectionate, or less human. Independent films are progressively challenging conventional representations by depicting overweight individuals

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[4] Jason Moore, Director, *Pitch Perfect* (Universal Pictures, 2012), 1hr 52m.

[5] Bobby Farrelly and Peter Farrelly, Directors, *Shallow Hal* (20th Century Fox, 2001), 1hr 54m.

[6] Caleb Luna, Book Review, 'Fat on Film: Gender, Race and Body Size in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema Fat on Film: Gender, Race and Body Size in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema,' by Barbara Plotz, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, $40.95 (paperback), *Fat Studies* 13, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2023.2201013

[7] Nikkhil Advani, Director, *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Dharma Productions, 2003), 3hr 6m.

[8] Karan Johar, Director, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Dharma Productions, 2001), 3hr 30m.

[9] Sharat Katariya, Director, *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* (Yash Raj Films, 2015), 1hr 50m.

[10] K.S. Singh, 'Destigmatization of the fat female body in *Size Zero* and *Dum Laga ke Haisha*.' *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 7, no. 3 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2018.1424411.

with dignity, autonomy, and complexity, without allowing their size to serve as the main source of tension or humour.[11]

Case Studies

Dumplin', directed by Anne Fletcher and based on Julie Murphy's novel, is a groundbreaking film that challenges societal expectations and honours the memory of a plus-size teenager, Willowdean.[12] The film emphasises body positivity, self-acceptance, and the mother-daughter dynamic, amidst idealised thinness. Willowdean's journey is not about changing her body but asserting her agency and rejecting shame. *Dumplin'* resists the makeover trope in mainstream teen films, focusing on emotional growth and self-realisation rather than physical transformation. The film offers a rare and affirming representation of fat girlhood.[13]

Real Women Have Curves, a film directed by Patricia Cardoso and based on Josefina López Fletcher's play,[14] follows Ana, a first-generation Mexican American teenager who navigates cultural expectations, economic pressures, and body image. Unlike mainstream portrayals, Ana is seen as intelligent, ambitious, and self-aware. The film emphasises her negotiation between family values and personal aspirations, offering a nuanced perspective on self-worth and authenticity amidst body shaming. Ana's rejection of societal pressures to lose weight serves as a radical act of self-definition. The memorable scene celebrates body diversity and collective empowerment, reclaiming the fat body from ridicule.[15]

Indie Cinema's contribution to fat representation

Indie cinema has become a crucial space for authentic and empowering representations of fat individuals, rejecting the dominant narrative that equates fatness with failure or deficiency. These films centre fat protagonists without moralising about their body size, allowing them to exist as full human beings with complex emotions, ambitions, and relationships. Through intimate storytelling, character depth, and emotional realism, Indie films reimagine beauty standards by showcasing the inherent dignity of all body types. They do not rely on fatness as a plot device but present it as one facet of a multidimensional character, contributing meaningfully to body liberation discourse and pushing against medicalised and moralised representations in mainstream media. Indie cinema becomes a site of resistance and a platform for reimagining what is possible, where fat characters are celebrated and centred.[16]

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[11] April Herndon, 'Disparate but disabled: fat Embodiment and Disability studies.' *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002), https://doi.org/10.1353/nwsa.2003.0007.

[12] Anne Fletcher, Director, *Dumplin'* (Netflix, 2018), 1hr 50m.

[13] Fletcher, Director, *Dumplin'*.

[14] Patricia Cardoso, Director, *Real Women Have Curves* (HBO Films, 2002), 1hr 30m.

[15] Cardoso, *Real Women have Curves*.

[16] Steven H. Cooper and Adrienne Harris, 'Film Review: Real women have curves (2002).' *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 86, no. 5 (2005), https://doi.org/10.1516/2a69-82v5-k3we-cnhc; Sarah A. Shelton, Combined book and film review: 'Film *Dumplin'* and Book *Puddin',*' *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 9, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2019.1603941.

Queer narratives in Indie films

Mainstream limitations

Historically, mainstream cinema has treated queer identities with ambivalence, distortion, or erasure. In Hollywood, queer characters are often written through heteronormative lenses, often reduced to sidekicks, comic relief, or tragic figures. Even when acknowledged, they are often portrayed through tokenism, lacking narrative depth, agency, or emotional complexity. In Bollywood, queer representation has suffered from stereotyping, invisibility, or tokenised inclusion. LGBTQ+ characters are often presented as caricatures, hypersexualised figures, or morally ambiguous individuals. Films like Tarun Mansukhani's *Dostana* reinforce these tropes by trivialising same-sex relationships and using queerness as a plot device for humour.[17] Even when Bollywood attempts more serious portrayals, queer lives are often framed through tragedy, isolation, or martyrdom, reflecting societal discomfort rather than affirmation. Raghava Lawrence's *Laxmii*, a horror-comedy aimed at bringing transgender identity to mainstream audiences, was widely criticised for its misrepresentation of transgender people.[18] These portrayals reinforce the marginality of queer identities in cinematic storytelling and contribute to real-world stigma and erasure. In the West, this often centres on white, middle-class gay male narratives, while in India, portrayals are skewed toward upper-caste, urban, Hindu perspectives, sidelining the complexities of caste, class, religion, and gender within queer lives.[19]

Case Studies

Dee Rees's, *Pariah* offers a groundbreaking representation of a Black lesbian teenager, Alike, who navigates the complexities of her sexual identity within the confines of a conservative family and community.[20] The film resists mainstream tendencies to frame queerness as either hypersexualised or pathologised. Instead, it embraces emotional realism, emphasising self-acceptance, coming-of-age, and the difficult choices LGBTQ+ youth often face. Through nuanced cinematography and character-driven storytelling, *Pariah* illustrates the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality without reducing Alike's identity to a single dimension.

Aurora Guerrero's *Mosquita y Mari* focuses on the tender, often unspoken relationship between two Latina teenagers in East Los Angeles.[21] The film captures the fluidity of queer adolescence through an exploration of friendship, cultural pressures, and emotional intimacy. By choosing a non-linear, atmospheric narrative, Guerrero resists defining the girls' relationship in rigid terms, allowing ambiguity and silence to carry emotional weight. The film

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[17] Tarun Mansukhani, Director, *Dostana* (Dharma Productions, 2008), 2hr 26m.

[18] Raghava Lawrence, Director, *Laxmii* (Cape of Good Films, Fox Star Studios, and Shabinaa Entertainment, 2020), 2hr 21m.

[19] Neha Jain, 'Indian Hindi Cinema and Queer Gaze: Presentation of LGBTQ+ in Bollywood,' *International Journal for Global Academic & Scientific Research* 1, no. 4 (2022), https://doi.org/10.55938/ijgasr.v1i4.34; Neha Kumari, and Rajni Singh, 'Representation of Alternative Sexuality in Bollywood: Performance, Appearance, and the Body,' *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 51 (1 November 2024). https://doi.org/10.25911/6RFB-KB74; Jeffrey Nelson, 'Homosexuality in Hollywood films: A contemporary paradox,' *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2, no. 1 (1985), https://doi.org/10.1080/15295038509360061.

[20] Dee Rees, Director, *Pariah* (Focus Features, 2011), 1hr 26m.

[21] Aurora Guerrero, Director, *Mosquita y Mari* (Wolfe Releasing, 2012), 1hr 25m.

is notable for its authenticity and refusal to conform to either mainstream romance tropes or explicit labels, reflecting the subtle realities of queer youth in working-class communities.

Sean Baker's *Tangerine* marks a radical departure from conventional transgender representation by casting trans women of colour—Kitana Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor—as the film's protagonists.[22] Set on the streets of Los Angeles and shot entirely on an iPhone, the film explores themes of urban survival, sisterhood, and resilience. Unlike typical portrayals of trans characters as tragic or deviant, *Tangerine* is vibrant, funny, and unapologetically real. Its raw aesthetic, use of community-based casting, and embrace of everyday queerness challenge dominant cinematic aesthetics and ethical frameworks around representation.

Narrative strategies in Indie queer cinema

Independent queer film is characterised not just by its representation but also by its narrative techniques. Unlike the conventional frameworks and sanitised narratives often found in mainstream media, independent queer films use new and radical storytelling techniques that authentically represent the lived experiences, emotional nuances, and socio-cultural intricacies of queer existence. These methods are not only aesthetic selections; they are political interventions designed to challenge prevailing cinematic norms.[23]

Independent queer films employ innovative narrative strategies to tell stories that feel lived-in and emotionally authentic. These include non-linear storytelling that reflects the fluidity of identity and time in queer life. Independent queer cinema employs narrative strategies that challenge traditional linear narratives, focusing on fluidity, temporality, and self-discovery. Films like *Pariah*, *Mosquita y Mari,* and *Tangerine* employ techniques that embrace uncertainty, emotional complexity, and nonlinear progression. *Pariah* tells the story of Alike, a Black lesbian teenager, as a fragmented journey marked by resistance, concealment, and personal revelation. *Mosquita y Mari* avoids romantic consummation and identity labelling, presenting the evolving relationship between two Chicana teenagers with subtlety and ambiguity. *Tangerine*, a fast-paced and comedic film, follows two trans sex workers on Christmas Eve in Los Angeles, prioritising community ties, fragmented experiences, and survival strategies over plot progression. These films defy linear time and conventional narrative arcs, showcasing queer temporality rooted in everyday struggle and resilience.[24]

Realism avoids over dramatisation or fantasy tropes common in mainstream portrayals. Another hallmark of Indie queer cinema is its commitment to realism, often manifested through low-budget aesthetics, on-location shooting, and naturalistic performances. Unlike mainstream films that often dramatise or pathologise queer experiences, independent films seek emotional truth in everyday moments. This aesthetic realism is evident in works like *Pariah*, where the emotional and material textures of a Black queer teenager's life are rendered with unflinching intimacy. These portrayals avoid the

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[22] Sean Baker, Director, *Tangerine* (Magnolia Pictures, 2015), 1hr 28m.

[23] Patricia White, 'Pariah (2011): Coming Out in the Middle,' *US Independent Film After 1989: Possible Films,* 2015, https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-film-media/50.

[24] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press eBooks, 2010), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822393184.

melodrama or spectacle that often distort queer lives in commercial cinema, focusing instead on subtle gestures, silences, and interactions that feel authentic and embodied.[25]

Community-based casting and collaboration ensures that queer voices—particularly those from marginalised communities—inform the creative process. Importantly, Indie queer cinema often emphasises community-based casting and collaborative filmmaking, ensuring that queer people—especially those from multiply marginalised backgrounds—are not only portrayed on screen but also shape the narrative behind the scenes. Films such as *Tangerine*, shot entirely on an iPhone and featuring real trans women of colour as leads, exemplify this model. Director Sean Baker worked closely with co-lead Mya Taylor to develop characters that reflected her lived experience, resulting in a story that resists stereotypes and foregrounds trans agency. This collaborative ethos fosters epistemic justice, allowing queer communities to speak for themselves rather than be spoken about.[26]

These narrative strategies—non-linearity, realism, and community involvement—challenge the flattening tendencies of mainstream cinema, which often reduce queerness to palatable tropes or tragic arcs. Indie queer cinema instead creates spaces of resistance and reclamation, where complex identities can unfold without the pressure to conform to normative expectations. By disrupting conventional narrative frameworks, these films make room for ambiguity, contradiction, and emotional depth—qualities essential to honest and affirming representations of queer life.

Neurodivergent representation in Indie films

Mainstream depictions

Mainstream films, both western and Indian, have traditionally shown neurodivergent characters, especially those with autism, via limited and stereotyped perspectives that categorise them as either extraordinary, pitiable, or encumbering. This has led to popular misconceptions about neurodivergent experiences, often favouring neurotypical viewpoints and emotional reactions above genuine portrayal. In Hollywood, renowned figures such as *Raymond* in Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* have solidified the portrayal of the autistic genius,[27] transforming autism into a show of exceptionalism while obscuring the diverse range of neurodivergent experiences.[28] Stephen Daldry's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* focuses on a teenage protagonist's neurodivergence,[29] highlighting emotional isolation and the apparent burden it imposes on people in his vicinity. Academics denote this prevailing perspective as the 'neurotypical gaze,' a narrative framework that reduces neurodivergent people to mere symbols or emotional stimuli for conventional protagonists.[30]

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[25] B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Duke University Press, 2013), https://transreads.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2022-01-13_61e07a5f90f1a_NewQueerCinemaTheDirectorsCutbyB.RubyRichz-lib.org_.pdf.

[26] 'Announcing Queer,' *Icon Books,* 24 February 2016, http://www.iconbooks.com/blog/2016/02/24/queer-acquisition-announcement/.

[27] Barry Levinson, Director, *Rain Man* (United Artists, 1988), 2hr 13m.

[28] Samantha Harker, 'The Importance of Autistic Representation in film,' *Organization for Autism Research,* 15 December 2021, https://researchautism.org/blog/the-importance-of-autistic-representation-in-film/.

[29] Stephen Daldry, Director, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2011), 2hr 9m.

[30] Abiodun Okunola, 'The Spectrum of Self: A Comparative Study of Characters with Autism in Classic and Modern Literature,' 14 February 2025, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5137675.

The Indian movie *Barfi!* directed by Anurag Basu, the character Jhilmil, an autistic woman played by Priyanka Chopra, faced criticism for its trivialised and idealised representation of autism.[31] The film's emotional trajectory centred on the redemptive journey of the empathetic teacher, rather than the inner experience or autonomy of the youngster. Karan Johar's *My Name Is Khan* endeavours to humanise Asperger's Syndrome via the character of Rizwan Khan,[32] however it reduces his neurodivergence to a metaphor for innocence and moral clarity, using his character to illustrate social prejudice and salvation in a post-9/11 milieu.[33]

These films often perpetuate ableist stereotypes by portraying neurodivergent persons as worthwhile just when they exhibit exceptional abilities or function as ethical guides for others. They neglect to portray neurodivergent persons as independent, complex beings with distinct viewpoints, difficulties, and communities.

Case Studies

Rachel Israel's *Keep the Change* stands out for its decision to cast autistic actors in autistic roles—a rarity in both mainstream and independent cinema.[34] The film is a romantic comedy that avoids both pity and pedestal raising, instead portraying neurodivergent characters as individuals capable of humour, love, intimacy, and self-growth. The narrative centres on everyday relational dynamics, allowing neurodivergent characters emotional complexity rather than flattening them into diagnostic tropes. The authenticity is enhanced by the lived experiences the actors bring to their roles, contributing to greater representation through embodiment.

Known as X+Y in the UK, Morgan Matthews's *A Brilliant Young Mind* follows Nathan,[35] a teenager on the autism spectrum who enters an international maths competition. While the narrative does draw on the trope of the gifted savant, it also delves into emotional development, mother-son relationships, and empathy, complicating the usual narrative of autistic detachment. Director Morgan Matthews avoids making Nathan's abilities his defining trait and instead portrays a young person navigating grief, connection, and self-understanding, thereby offering a more humane and well-rounded depiction.

Reframing neurodivergence

Independent films are helping to reframe neurodivergence by prioritising relational dynamics over diagnostic traits and by making lived experiences central to the film.

A notable transformation in Indie cinema's depiction of neurodivergent people is its departure from characterising these persons using only clinical or diagnostic paradigms. In contrast to mainstream films that typically emphasise characteristics linked to conditions—such as repetitive behaviours, communication challenges, or savant skills—independent films generally concentrate on relational dynamics, examining how neurodivergent individuals

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[31] Anurag Basu, Director, *Barfi!* (UTV Motion Pictures, 2012), 2hr 31m.

[32] Karan Johar, Director, *My Name Is Khan* (Dharma Productions and Red Chillies Entertainment, 2010), 2hr 45m.

[33] P.R. Tharian, S. Henderson, N. Wathanasin et al., 'Characters with autism spectrum disorder in fiction: where are the women and girls?' *Advances in Autism* 5, no. 1 (2019), https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/197233/.

[34] Rachel Israel, Director. *Keep the Change* (Kornhaber Brown, 2017), 1hr 34m.

[35] Morgan Matthews, Director, *A Brilliant Young Mind* (Koch Media and BBC Films, 2014), 1hr 51m.

interact with their surroundings, establish relationships, and manoeuvre through social contexts. This approach humanises neurodivergent characters, enabling them to be portrayed as fully developed persons whose identities transcend their diagnoses. Indie films depict autism, ADHD, and other kinds of neurodivergence not as static symptomatologies but as integral components of an individual's lived experience, interwoven within a larger story of emotional connectivity, self-expression, and relational development.

In *Keep the Change*, the plot focuses on a love connection between two autistic people portrayed by autistic actors. The film intentionally refrains from pathologising these characters, instead prioritising their personalities, humour, and emotional needs. Their autism is not diminished nor amplified—it is simply an intrinsic aspect of their identity, shown authentically in their daily interactions. The emphasis is on emotional closeness, permission, trust, and vulnerability, rather than on actions that conform to diagnostic criteria.[36]

By emphasising relationship dynamics, these films reject the prevalent cinematic archetypes of the 'isolated genius' and 'inconvenient burden,' opting instead for themes of community, belonging, and reciprocal care. This perspective critiques the medical concept of disability, which often isolates and individualises neurodivergence, by instead highlighting a social-relational model. This approach conceptualises disability as a product of the interaction between persons and their settings, emphasising the significance of supporting relationships, adaptive communication, and the need for inclusion.[37]

This transition signifies the increasing impact of neurodivergent perspectives on filmmaking—via casting, advice, or direction—enhancing authenticity and understanding of real-life neurodivergent experiences. Instead of simplifying neurodivergent characters to mere symptoms, independent films are progressively depicting them as active participants in their narratives, with emotional and relational lives that are intricate, multifaceted, and deserving of substantial narrative exploration. Indie film is moving away from characterising neurodivergent individuals via only clinical or diagnostic lenses, emphasising relational dynamics and examining their interactions with the world, relationship formation, and navigation of social contexts. This methodology humanises neurodivergent characters, enabling them to be portrayed as fully developed persons whose identities transcend mere diagnoses. In recent times, mainstream cinema in Bollywood has also attempted genuine portrayals of various neurodivergent conditions. A striking example is the character of teacher Naina Mathur in Siddharth P. Malhotra's *Hichki,*[38] who showcases a teacher affected by Tourette's syndrome, who is rejected by her father for her condition, mocked by her colleagues and students alike but is depicted as an ambitious and resilient character. Like any other teacher she ultimately aspires to be not just a good teacher but to be able to rise higher in her profession. Naina has had her moments of vulnerability, anger over her condition, and helplessness in instances where her condition is mocked by a bunch of difficult students. She is not portrayed as a character who is unbothered by the condition at all, but she faces everyday hardships, just as any other person without a neurodivergent condition would have.

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[36] Milly Redden, 'Keep the Change: actors with autism get the chance to shine in romcom,' *Guardian,* 20 March 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/mar/16/keep-the-change-actors-with-autism-get-the-chance-to-shine-in-romcom.

[37] Reese Piper, "Keep the Change' is the movie the autistic community has long been waiting for,' *Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network (AWN)*, 9 April 2018, https://awnnetwork.org/keep-the-change-is-the-movie-the-autistic-community-has-long-been-waiting-for/.

[38] Siddharth P. Malhotra, Director, *Hichki* (Yash Raj Films, 2018), 1hr 56m.

Indie cinema is increasingly incorporating techniques that refrain from pathologising their characters while highlighting their personalities, humour and emotional needs. This perspective challenges the medical concept of disability, highlighting a social-relational model that prioritises supportive connections, adaptable communication, and inclusivity.[39] This transition signifies the increasing impact of neurodivergent perspectives on filmmaking, enhancing the authenticity and understanding of real-life neurodivergent experiences. Independent films are progressively depicting neurodivergent persons as protagonists in their narratives, whose emotional and relational experiences are intricate, multifaceted, and deserving of substantial narrative exploration, rejecting pathologising narratives and the fetishisation of 'genius.' Cinematic representations of neurodivergent persons, especially those on the autistic spectrum, have traditionally fluctuated between two prevailing tropes: pathologisation and the fetishisation of brilliance. These simplistic frames distort the wide range of neurodivergent experiences and perpetuate societal stigmas and false expectations. Conversely, Indie film is progressively eschewing these storylines in favour of more authentic, varied, and respectful portrayals. Mainstream cinema often pathologises neurodivergence by portraying it as an impairment, abnormality, or emotional burden, typically to make it more acceptable to neurotypical audiences. This methodology often diminishes neurodivergent persons' complexity, autonomy, and identity, relegating them to mere diagnoses. Films like as *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and *My Name Is Khan* exemplify this genre, highlighting the dissonance of neurodivergent people with their surroundings, hence underscoring the notion that their traits are intrinsically sad or disruptive.[40]

Indie films embrace the social concept of disability, depicting neurodivergence not as an issue to be resolved but as a variation to be comprehended. They alter the discourse from remedying the individual to interrogating society norms, expectations, and biases. The fetishisation of 'genius' is a detrimental cliche propagated by popular film, particularly in the depiction of autistic individuals. This depiction establishes unattainable ideals, disregards typical neurodivergent experiences, and dehumanises neurodivergent individuals.

By eschewing pathologising frameworks and the fetishisation of brilliance, independent films provide opportunities for multi-dimensional individuals whose neurodivergence is neither a problem nor a spectacle. Films such as *Keep the Change* mainstream neurodivergent behaviours without embellishment or elucidation, enabling audiences to see neurodivergence as just an alternative mode of being. Reductive frames showcasing neurodivergent conditions in either patronising or comic light tend to distort the wide range of neurodivergent experiences and perpetuate societal stigmas and false expectations. Conversely, Indie film is progressively rejecting these themes in favour of more authentic, varied, and respectful portrayals.[41] Independent films sometimes eschew this framework in favour of more nuanced portrayals, shown in *A Brilliant Young Mind* which

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[39] Nils Skudra, 'Keep the Change a new film with an autistic protagonist,' *The Art of Autism,* 4 September 2018, https://the-art-of-autism.com/keep-the-change-a-new-film-with-an-autistic-protagonist/.

[40] Theodoto Wafula Ressa and Alana Goldstein, 'Autism in the Movies: Stereotypes and Their Effects on Neurodiverse Communities,' *Journal of Disability Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021).

[41] 'How film and media shape our understanding of neurodiversity,' *Differently Wired,* 2 November 2020, https://differentlywired.co.uk/how-film-and-media-shape-our-understanding-of-neurodiversity.

emphasises the character's emotional development, social awkwardness, and growing relationships.[42]

Intersections and overlaps

Lack of intersectional representation in mainstream media

Mainstream cinema has long struggled with intersectionality—the understanding that people hold multiple, interconnected identities that shape their lived experiences.[43] Instead, films often isolate identity categories, depicting characters as either fat, or queer, or neurodivergent, but rarely acknowledging that someone can embody multiple marginalised identities simultaneously. This compartmentalised approach flattens character complexity and reinforces the idea that identity can be cleanly categorised.

For example, a queer character might be thin, white, and neurotypical, while a neurodivergent character may be portrayed as straight and male. Such selective representations serve dominant narratives, keeping characters within narrowly defined boundaries and often privileging the most 'palatable' versions of marginalisation for broader audiences.[44]

Indie cinema's intersectional lens

Independent films, by contrast, are increasingly embracing an intersectional approach, recognising that identities do not exist in silos. Indie cinema allows for messy, overlapping, and nuanced characters who defy the rigid binaries of mainstream storytelling. These films highlight how body size, sexuality, neurodivergence, race, class, gender, and culture intersect to shape a character's world and how they are perceived within it. Fat and queer, as seen in *Dumplin'*, depicts the protagonist navigating both body image and romantic desires without reducing either identity to a trope. Queer and neurodivergent is a dynamic reflected in characters from *Keep the Change,* where the central relationship involves two autistic adults negotiating romance, identity, and self-expression. Queer and racialised are like the protagonists in *Pariah* and *Mosquita y Mari*, who are not only exploring sexual identity but also dealing with cultural, familial, and social expectations tied to their racial and ethnic backgrounds. These films often include scenes of everyday life that feel deeply personal and complex, where multiple identity markers are not explicitly announced but naturally coexist—creating a richer and more realistic form of representation.[45]

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[42] Steven Eastwood, Bonnie Evans, Sebastian Gaigg, Janet Harbord, and Damian Milton, 'Autism through cinema: co-creation and the unmaking of knowledge,' *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 38, no. 5 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2022.2025492.

[43] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 8, https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8.

[44] Kristina Mazur, *Barbara Hammer in the Seventies: or what a body can do* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-59695-7.

[45] Laura Albet Castillejo, Laura Castro Roldán, and Laura Fernández, 'On a slim epiphany. Fatness, queerness, animality and death in *The Whale* (Darren Aronofsky, 2022),' *Fat Studies* 14, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2025.2495991; Hannah R. Long, *'Fat is a Queer Issue, Too': Complicating Queerness and Body Size in Women's Sexual Orientation and Identity*' (UNM Digital Repository, 16 September 2020), https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cj_etds/131.

Case for holistic representation

The importance of such intersectional storytelling lies in its ability to break binaries and stereotypes. It resists the reduction of characters to one identity trait and instead offers multidimensional portrayals that reflect the way real people live. Holistic representation is also politically significant—it pushes back against the singular narratives that have dominated media and challenges the viewer to engage with characters in their full humanity.

Indie films provide a vital space where complex stories can flourish—free from commercial constraints and audience expectations that often limit mainstream productions. By centring lived experience and identity fluidity, Indie cinema carves out room for people who are often told they are 'too much' or 'don't fit.'[46] As audiences become more aware and diverse themselves, intersectional representation is not just desirable—it is essential. Indie filmmakers are showing that authentic storytelling must reflect the real, entangled, and intersectional ways that identity shapes experience.[47]

It is however worth noting that the not all Indie films are flawless. They can be held accountable for spreading false information, fostering prejudice, and merely portraying one-dimensional viewpoints, even though they have made some important and influential contributions to the representation of stigmatised situations including queerness, neurodivergence, and obesity. The establishment of regulatory bodies that are universally accepted is one of the dire needs of the present time, as without them independent films may escape justified criticism and occasionally portray marginalised people in an erroneous and improper manner.

Conclusion

In this paper we have explored how Indie film is a formidable counterforce to the simplistic and stereotyped representations of overweight, gay, and neurodivergent identities that have historically prevailed in mainstream media. While Hollywood and other mainstream industries frequently depend on limited stereotypes—such as the overweight character on a weight-loss journey, the queer character destined for hardship, or the neurodivergent individual portrayed as either a burden or a prodigy—independent films contest these norms by providing genuine, multi-faceted representations.[48]

Indie film places these identities at the core of the story rather than on its outskirts. Films such as *Dumplin'* and *Real Women Have Curves* portray overweight heroines with agency and emotional depth. *Pariah, Tangerine,* and *Mosquita y Mari* provide unfiltered, intersectional LGBTQ+ narratives rooted in ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status. *Keep the Change* and *A Brilliant Young Mind* depict neurodivergent persons not as issues to be resolved, but as individuals with profound interior lives, aspirations, and connections.

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[46] Joy Philip and Adam Davies, 'Compassionately fat: an autotheoretical exploration of queer bodies,' *Fat Studies* 13, no. 2 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2024.2340012.

[47] Yovita Aryani, Unshrinking: How to face fatphobia, *Fat Studies* 1–2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2025.2489233; Daniel Lenghart, Martin Dolejš, Michal Čerešník, and Nikoleta Kontová, 'Belief in Unsubstantiated Claims about LGBTQ+ and Discriminatory Behaviour of Slovak LGBTQ+ and Heterosexually-identified Adolescent Boys and Girls Towards Sexual and Gender Minorities,' *Interalia a Journal of Queer Studies* 19 (2024), https://doi.org/10.51897/interalia/DHSY4512.

[48] Charu Dhankar, Kriti Vashishtha, Shraddha Tripathi, Ruchi Joshi, Ayushi Tyagi, Meenakshi Joshi, and Kirti Shekhawat, 'A call to action: Addressing the mental health disparities of LGBTQIA+ Indians,' *Multidisciplinary Science Journal* 6, no. 5 (2023), https://doi.org/10.31893/multiscience.2024069.

Independent film is distinguished not only by its themes but also by its innovative storytelling techniques and participatory production methodologies. Indie films function as cultural criticism and creative intervention by adopting non-linear narratives, realism, community-based casting, and engaging underrepresented artists in production roles. They reveal the shortcomings of conventional frameworks while simultaneously constructing new paradigms of inclusion that embody the whole variety of human experience.

Thus, independent cinema transcends being solely an alternative to mainstream film; it serves as a transforming arena for narratives to be conveyed with profundity, dignity, and sincerity. It redefines screen representation and narrative authority, challenging identity homogeneity and the obliteration of complexity.

As fans, researchers, and cultural actors, we acknowledge the political and artistic significance of independent films in contesting prevailing narratives. This entails actively endorsing films and artists who challenge conventions, financing platforms that elevate minority perspectives, and promoting industry frameworks that eradicate gatekeeping and tokenism.

Authentic representation encompasses not just exposure but also voice, authorship, and agency. By prioritising these values, we may foster a media environment in which overweight, queer, and neurodivergent persons are not only used as plot devices but are honoured as the protagonists of their own narratives.

It is worth noting however, that slowly but steadily the new age cinema is coming of age and some serious efforts of genuine portrayal of different conditions on the margin are made in mainstream cinema as well. Queer, fat or neurodivergent characters are portrayed in a light that illuminates experience and showcases normal and obvious emotions. Laila's character in Shonali Bose's Margarita *with a Straw,*[49] is not ashamed of her sexuality with her condition of cerebral palsy, nor is *Rimjhims's* character in *Barfi* making an attempt to hide her jealousy when the object of her affection is more attentive to another woman. These characters emphasise that queer, fat and neurodivergent characters are entitled to the same emotions as people without these conditions. While Indie films may boast a fair portrayal, mainstream cinema has better reach. Instead of overlapping in separate directions, the two media can work together to create a rich and realistic cinematic experience.

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[49] Shonali Bose, Director, *Margarita with a Straw* (Viacom18 Motion Pictures, 2014), 120m.

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