

Mental Health, Legal Awareness, and Social Responsibility in Regional Cinema: A Study of the Tripura Short Film Stutter

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Abstract

This paper examines the Tripura short film Stutter through the interdisciplinary frameworks of Disability Studies, Psychoanalysis, Affect Theory, and Critical Health Humanities to analyse the relationship between communicative disability, mental health, and social exclusion. The study proposes an analysis of stuttering that goes beyond the medical model of communication and illustrates that disfluency in speech is socially disabling because of the ridicule, humiliation and exclusion from fluent communication imposed by the dominant norms of communication in society today. The research also proves that the prolonged denial of communication and emotional estrangement results in psychological vulnerability and broken identities. By analyzing the protagonist's transformation or metamorphosis through a psychoanalytic and affective perspective, the research provides evidence for the link between the shame of communication impairment, emotional repression and aggressive behavior. The study further discusses the role of regional cinema in raising awareness about mental illness and in developing legal consciousness and social accountability towards communication disabilities. The final conclusion of this research is that Stutter criticizes ableist ways of social organization and advocates more inclusive, sympathetic and psychologically sensitive perspectives on disability and mental illness in today's society.

Keywords: Legal Awareness, Mental Health, Regional Cinema, Communicative Disability, Psychological Vulnerability

Introduction

Regional-based cinema is growing in stature seen as an important means of expressing issues around social realities, mental health, and public accountability. The Tripura short film Stutter is a critical examination of speech impairment and psychological vulnerability, particularly with its focus on the impact of speech disfluency on an individual's ability to connect socially, thus, causing those individual feelings of social isolation, embarrassment, shame, and emotional distress. The film attempts to engage broader societal and psychological impacts of communicative differences, as opposed to only focusing on the medical aspects of stuttering. Fluency in speech is generally linked to a person's intelligence, self-confidence, and social acceptability, while speech disfluency is frequently linked to a lack of ability, weakness, or as evidence of illness or affliction. Consequently, individuals that suffer from a speech disfluency are frequently subject to marginalization, ridicule or social exclusion within the social and institutional environments in which they find themselves. This study investigates Stutter through multiple fields including Disability Studies, Psychoanalysis, Affect Theory, and Critical Health Humanities to explore how communicative disabilities, mental health issues and social stigma inter-relate. The author contends that the way in which the protagonist's psychological fragmentation and violent acts of aggression occur aren't separate instances of personal pathology but instead illustrate an accumulation of long-term psychological humiliation and emotional suppression and social neglect. The film provides evidence of how the denial of voice (the ability to speak) and recognition (being acknowledged) damages an individual's ability to have an identifiable self that belongs to a group and provides him/her with a secure base upon which to establish emotional stability in the world. Additionally, the paper examines how regional cinemas can provide public information about mental health and inspire legal consciousness and promote responsibility towards others within society. Furthermore, the representation of communicative disability presented in Stutter connects to larger issues of social inclusion,

dignity and empathetic engagement with individuals vulnerable to our psychological fragility. Through challenging normative perceptions of what constitutes “normal” speech and social acceptance of it, the film offers the viewer an opportunity to reflect on communicative disability’s existence as not being a deficiency within the individual but rather a manifestation resulting from various social structural, cultural and emotional forces operating within society. Thus, *Stutter* is presented as valuable regional cinematic material supporting mental health legislation, disability awareness, and the ethical responsibilities each of us assumes towards one another in today’s world.

Communicative Disability, Social Exclusion and the Politics of Voice

Stuttering or disfluency in one's speech is not only a physical or biological issue; it is also a very social and political issue. Stuttering or speech disfluency is a social construct and is made worse by people's expectations to speak fluently. In addition to being socially created and reinforced, fluent speech is used to define and classify people as intelligent, qualified individuals who belong to a community. Individuals with speech disfluencies are often ridiculed, rejected, and symbolically erased for their speech. Modern societies view speech as a method of controlling and regulating people’s actions and behaviours; therefore, fluency in one's speech means that the speaker is logical and in a position of authority and is socially legitimate within that society. Conversely, someone who has trouble speaking is presumed not to be logical or not in a position of authority and has some type of impairment or has not conformed to society's standard in terms of his or her speech. According to Lennard J. Davis, the concept of 'normalcy' has developed historically as a statistical reality or measure, through which 'disability' is established as the 'other' of 'normalcy' (Davis 3). For that reason, stuttering is not just a variation of speech; it is a violation of the imposed 'language ideal or standard', which has led to the character's ultimately being marginalised by society because of his inability to conform to 'speech standards'. The character's experience shows the way that society marginalises certain individuals and how people who have difficulty with communicating are invisibly marginalised by society but, at the same time, are hyper-visible to other people in their society as being the subject of ridicule. The character's experiences of being publicly ridiculed in the printing office exemplify how communicative disabilities are a place where societal norms of how to communicate are policed through the ridicule and exclusion of the 'normal speaker'. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's idea of the "normate" adds to the clarification of this dynamic. The normate body is constructed as the universal ideal against which all bodies, including disabled bodies, are viewed as deviant acts of spectacle (Garland-Thomson 8). The stammering protagonist is situated outside of the normate category, and therefore subject to what may be defined as "linguistic ableism" (based on dominating speech norms).

From this psychoanalytic viewpoint, we view the protagonist’s stutter as both a psychological indication of trauma as well as a symptom of deeper conflict within themselves. Sigmund Freud describes a person’s symptoms as a manifestation of their trauma that has been repressed and return in distorted form (Freud 16). As such, the protagonist’s disorder in their speech is used to represent how the unresolved trauma within them has been physically inscribed onto their body, because of several times being humiliated and excluded from society. The film implies that each time the protagonist has been verbally humiliated, it has become a trigger for their trauma. Due to this, those instances serve to reaffirm their feeling of being less than others and at the same time push them towards repression. However, when someone experiences repression, they still have feelings associated with what they are repressing, so when the protagonist eventually acts out violently, this is what Freud refers to as the “return of the repressed.” Repressed emotion eventually finds a way to surface, often times being expressed in the extreme and destructive form that they find themselves expressing through their violent actions.

Lacan considers that to develop as a subject; a person must enter into the Symbolic Order (language or social laws) as a framework for that development. The stammered speech of the protagonist illustrates how his access to the Symbolic Order has been disrupted. His failure to speak fluently means that there is a conflict in how he relates to language. Lacan states, “The unconscious is structured like a language.” (Lacan 203) Therefore, any difficulty speaking suggests that there is a deeper conflict in the subject’s identity. His predicament; being constructed by language while being excluded from participating in it as a normative participant creates a developmental crisis

of identity with the subject moving back and forth between non-being (invisible) to being (erased). The actions of the protagonist can also be interpreted as attempts to reclaim his subjectivity through the violent actions taken to gain agency in the system from which he has been denied his voice.

Disability Studies alters understanding of the way that disabilities are produced, changing the focus of individual disabilities to structural inequalities in society. The protagonist's stutter is disabling through social reactions towards him such as ridicule, marginalization and devaluation, rather than through the stutter itself. Davis states that disability is not a condition that someone is born with but a category created by social norms (Davis 24). The way that the protagonist is treated demonstrates that the experience of the stutter is reflected through the experience of stigma associated with being disabled. The ridicule of him by people around him, especially the bride who mocks him, highlights how everyday social interaction reproduces ableist hierarchies. This moment in the film represents a key moment in that it connects latent feelings of anger with an act of violence toward him, illustrating how cumulative micro aggressive behaviours result in a violent act towards someone based on their disability. Garland-Thomson's concept of "misfitting" is applicable to the ways in which the protagonist experiences a speech misfit, i.e., when one's body does not fit within the social or environmental structure. Since the protagonist's stutter misfits with the society's valuing of fluent speech, he is precluded from participating meaningfully. This misfit is not something that occurs naturally; rather it is created through the rigid social constructs surrounding communicative norms.

Affect Theory provides a critical lens for examining how emotionality operates in social structures and affects our experience of subjectivity. Sara Ahmed argues that emotions are not simply private conditions of internal states but rather social forces that "stick" to both physical bodies and representational signs of them that affect how people see us and how we experience how others see us (Ahmed 11). The effect of shame is one of the central affects associated with communicative disability in the protagonist's case, and his stammer is repeatedly connected to shame through publicly humiliating episodes. This shame is not self-generated but rather imposed on him by other members of society as evidenced through his interactions with them that mark him as inferior; as a result, over time, this build-up of positive affect becomes an intense rage. Ahmed's notion of "affective economies" provides a model for how emotionality builds in intensity from person to person through their movement through each other's bodies creating a chain reaction of humiliation leading to resentment.

The affect as intensity framework proposed by Brian Massumi helps to clarify the transformation of the protagonist. Affect is understood to function at a preconscious level that builds up over time prior to having verbalized forms. Therefore, when the protagonist has violent outbursts, these can be understood as the elimination of accumulated affective intensity, the build-up of repressed feelings that have now surpassed their containment capacity. The godown, the location where he captures and tortures his victims, serves as a metaphorically affective condensation area; where his internal psychological state (i.e., the intersection of rage and shame) has developed into acts of physical violence. Massumi's understanding of how affect bypasses rationality, allowing for sudden and extreme behavioural manifestations (Massumi 27). The protagonist's violence cannot be considered as a fundamental pathology but rather as a reaction to being systemically silenced. The political dynamics of voice operate through the negation of legitimacy to specific methods of communication resulting in people being rendered voiceless. Within this framework, violence functions as a distorted means of communicating one's presence within a system that will not acknowledge that presence. The first murder is committed against someone who taunts the protagonist for having a stutter, thus setting a precedent for future acts of violence. Each act of violence is linked to moments of humiliation, highlighting the relationship between marginalised methods of communication and a subsequent aggressive reaction. Although this does not serve as an excuse for the violent acts, it does offer a contextual understanding of them within a broader socio-psychological perspective. The ultimate confrontation and the protagonist's murder by his fiancée function to restore the established order; however, the woman's enduring trauma at the film's conclusion suggests that the cycle of violence has left behind unresolved emotional consequences. Consequently, the politics of voice transcends the individual, influencing collective emotional experiences.

Conclusion

This paper portrays that *Stutter*, a short film produced in Tripura has redefined communication disabilities as a product of society and culture and that it is therefore far wider than the act of speaking. The stammer of the main character is not just a physical impediment to them communicating, it is a place where marginalisation (being pushed to the edge), exclusion (not being included within society), and fragmented identity intersect. The research, through the lens of Disability Studies, demonstrates that normative expectations of fluency, render the protagonist as "a deviant", pointing to the politics of voice as a mechanism of social control (Davis, 1995; Garland-Thomson, 2001). Frameworks of Psychoanalysis demonstrate that multiple incidences of humiliation result in repressed trauma, which is later manifested in a violent manner. Lacan's theories also described the fractured relationship between the protagonist, language and subjectivity (Freud; Lacan). Affect Theory deepens the meaning of the protagonist's experience by demonstrating that shame can accumulate and then be transformed into rage, which ultimately manifests as sadistic violence (Ahmed, 2004; Massumi, 2002). Most importantly, the movie does not confine the main character to pathology. Rather, his violent behavior is situated in a larger context of social and emotional exclusion and shows how daily experiences of ridicule can produce significant psychological effects. The unresolved emotional residue left in the wake of the violence shown at the end of the film suggests that such violence is cyclical. *Stutter* advocates for a critical reconceptualization of communicative disability as difference rather than deficit and recognizes the need to connect mental health and disability studies. It can be concluded from this paper that denying someone their voice is a political act that has both exclusionary and severely disintegrative psychological effects.

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