



# A Spectacle of Suffering: Disability, Euthanasia and Posthumanism in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Guzaarish*

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**Abstract**— This paper undertakes a critical analysis of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Guzaarish* (2010) via the interdisciplinary framework of Disability Studies, emphasising the intricate relationship between representation, agency, and socio-cultural ideology. The film focusses on Ethan Mascarenhas, a quadriplegic ex-magician, whose request for euthanasia generates conflicting narratives on autonomy, masculinity, and the commodification of suffering. This study employs the critical insights of academics such as Margrit Shildrick, David T. Mitchell, and Sharon L. Snyder to examine the interconnections of disability, vulnerability, and posthuman embodiment within cinematic discourse. The paper analyses how *Guzaarish* (2010) both romanticises and problematises disability, presenting it within an aestheticised tragedy while addressing Ethan's charismatic agency. This paper examines how the film's portrayal of Ethan's dependency redefines conventional masculinity and contests dominant notions of bodily perfection through posthumanist lens. This paper characterises *Guzaarish* (2010) as a contradictory work that alternates between reinforcing disability stereotypes as a manifestation of loss and offering instances of subversion that suggest the recovery of agency and dignity within the limitations of cinematic conventions. This paper elucidates the conflicts within Bollywood's engagement with disability as both a narrative and visual construct, providing new insights into its capacity for critique and complicity in sustaining ableist ideologies.



**Keywords**— Disability, Posthumanism, Masculinity, Bollywood, Euthanasia

## I. INTRODUCTION

Cinematic representations of disability frequently fluctuate between two extremes: the portrayal of disabled individuals as tragic embodiments of suffering or as inspirational figures. *Guzaarish* (2010), directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, is praised for its emotive profundity and artistic quality. However, it exemplifies these polarities by interweaving themes of ableism, masculinity, autonomy, and suffering. The film's ethical debates regarding euthanasia and the socio-cultural construction of disability are navigated through the narrative of Ethan Mascarenhas, the quadriplegic protagonist. This paper examines *Guzaarish* (2010) within the interdisciplinary framework of Disability Studies, supplemented by posthumanist perspective. The study explores the intersection of corporeal

vulnerability, masculinity, posthuman condition and autonomy in cinematic representation by incorporating insights from Margrit Shildrick, David T. Mitchell, and Sharon L. Snyder, Hayles, Haraway and Braidotti etc. It critically evaluates the manner in which *Guzaarish* (2010) reinforces hegemonic able-bodied norms while concurrently providing opportunities for resistance and reclamation.

## II. FRAGILE MASCULINITIES: THE CRISIS OF DEPENDENCY

Ethan's physical dependence is symbolically associated with a perceived loss of masculinity in *Guzaarish* (2010). His alleged failure as a man is exemplified by his inability to protect Sofia from her abusive ex-husband, which

reinforces hegemonic ideals of masculinity that emphasize physical strength and independence. This portrayal not only perpetuates the association between bodily autonomy and self-worth but also stigmatizes disability.

This cultural aversion to vulnerability is evidenced by the prioritization of control over one's body, which results in anxiety and stigmatization when one deviates from the idealized, self-contained subject. In *Guzaarish* (2010), this cultural bias is evident in the portrayal of Ethan Mascarenhas, who is depicted as experiencing a crisis of autonomy that threatens his masculine identity and subjectivity due to his disability. The film's exploration of masculinity, which is constructed by able-bodied standards, is inextricably linked to Ethan's disability. His present-day reliance on his nurse, Sofia (played by Aishwarya Rai), is starkly contrasted with his flashbacks, which portray him as a virile, successful magician adored by female admirers. This juxtaposition underscores the collapse of hegemonic masculinity, as Ethan bemoans his inability to safeguard Sofia from her abusive ex-husband—a failing that serves as a metaphor for his perceived loss of manhood.

Staples' (2011) critique of corporeal ability as central to male self-esteem and Connell's "hegemonic masculinity" (2005) can be used to analyse the intersection of disability and masculinity in *Guzaarish* (2010). Ethan's yearning for his past serves to reinforce societal norms that associate masculinity with independence and physical dominance. Simultaneously, the romantic interludes of the film challenge the stereotype of the disabled man as asexual, portraying Ethan as a subject worthy of admiration despite his physical limitations. Nevertheless, this dichotomy fails to challenge ableist narratives, as Ethan's sexual agency is ultimately eclipsed by his acceptance of a 'heroic' death.

### III. THE 'HERO' AS A POSTHUMAN SUBJECT

Historical human subjectivity has been defined by the anthropocentric, Cartesian ideals of rationality, autonomy, and bounded individuality, which are challenged by posthumanism. This theoretical framework destabilizes binary oppositions, including human/non-human, mind/body, and self/other, underscoring the human's interconnection with technology, materiality, and the broader ecological world. Posthumanism challenges the normative constructions of embodiment in the context of disability, providing an alternative to ableist ideals of productivity and autonomy.

Ethan Mascarenhas, a quadriplegic ex-magician, is a posthuman figure whose existence is dependent upon a combination of human and non-human elements. His decentered subjectivity, which disrupts the fiction of the autonomous, self-contained individual, is reflected in his

ventilator, specialized wheelchair, and the tactile interventions of his attendant, Sofia. Nevertheless, the film's portrayal of Ethan fluctuates between acknowledging this interdependence as a legitimate mode of existence and portraying it as a source of existential despair. Ethan's dependence on technology and care networks could be interpreted as a representation of the hybrid nature of all human existence from a posthuman perspective. Human embodiment has consistently been mediated by tools, technologies, and environments, as Hayles (1999) contends, thereby challenging the primacy of the "natural" body. Ethan's radio broadcasts in *Guzaarish* (2010)—facilitated by adaptive technology—evidence that his embodied difference does not preclude creativity or agency. However, the narrative ultimately portrays these interdependencies as lamentable constraints, thereby reinforcing ableist hierarchies that prioritize unassisted corporeal autonomy over technologically mediated existence.

A central tension in *Guzaarish* (2010) stems from Ethan's appeal for euthanasia, which is presented as a reclaiming of dignity and agency. This narrative is further complicated by posthuman theory, which challenges the notion that vulnerability and dependence diminish personhood. Posthumanism, as Braidotti (2013) observes, redefines vulnerability as a shared and inherent condition, thereby denying the ideal of invulnerable individuality. McRuer (2006) critiques "compulsory able-bodiedness," a cultural logic that equates a fulfilling life with the absence of dependency or impairment. The film's portrayal of Ethan's euthanasia request is consistent with this perspective. The portrayal of Ethan's desire for death as a rational response to his physical limitations fails to acknowledge the influence of societal ableism on his despair. The posthuman approach emphasises the cultural devaluation of interdependence that Ethan's situation reveals, portraying his technologically and socially mediated existence as 'less than' entirely human.

In his seminal work, Wolfe (2010) contends that posthumanism forces us to reevaluate the concept of "the human" as a category that is defined by its opposition to the technological, the nonhuman, and the disabled. Wolfe (2010) criticises the "normative concept of the human" for its role in perpetuating systemic exclusions, particularly in the context of disability. The humanist ideal of an autonomous, self-sufficient subject is challenged by Ethan's existence, which is marked by both his intellectual vibrancy and physical limitations. According to Wolfe (2010) the philosophical frameworks used by humanism...reproduce the very kind of normative subjectivity that grounds discrimination. Ethan's condition challenges the binary distinctions between the able-bodied and the disabled, and it prompts enquiries regarding the limits of autonomy and

personhood. The posthumanist concept that human existence is inherently mediated by nonhuman entities is emphasised by his reliance on technology for mobility and communication. Ethan's existence exemplifies Wolfe's assertion that to be posthuman means to rethink, ever anew and vigorously, the concepts of 'consciousness,' 'autonomy,' and 'agency' (2010) in this sense.

Wolfe (2010) expands the discourse to encompass the interrelations between systems and their environments, underscoring the manner in which systems self-organise and adapt, drawing from Luhmann's Systems Theory. In *Guzaarish* (2010), Ethan's existence is sustained by a complex system that includes his carers, medical devices, and legal advocates. His residence, a literal and metaphorical space of containment, functions as a microcosm of Luhmann's concept of autopoiesis—a self-sustaining system that is reliant on its internal coherence and external interactions (Wolfe 2010).

The dynamic feedback cycles in systems theory are mirrored in the interaction between Ethan, his advocate Devyani Dutta (Shernaz Patel), and his nurse Sofia D'Souza (Aishwarya Rai). Sofia's unwavering concern is not merely an act of altruism; it is a recognition of their interconnected existences, which is consistent with Wolfe's assertion that "systems are always entangled with their environments" (Wolfe 2010). Humanist individualism is destabilised by this relational ontology, which posits that human individuality is derived from connections and dependencies.

#### IV. THE ETHICS OF EUTHANASIA AND DISABILITY AS A SPECTACLE

The romanticization of suffering and the problematic framing of euthanasia as the ultimate resolution for disability constitute some of the central themes of *Guzaarish* (2010). Ethan is praised for his wit and charm, which are consistent with the "supercrip" trope. However, his narrative trajectory concludes with his appeal for euthanasia, a decision that is framed as valiant but is profoundly entrenched in ableist assumptions about the "unlivability" of disabled lives. Shildrick (2002) remarks, "where physical and mental autonomy, the ability to think rationally and impartially, and interpersonal separation and distinction are the valued attributes of western subjectivity, then any compromise of control over one's own body, any indication of interdependency and connectivity, or of corporeal instability, are the occasion – for the normative majority – of a deep-seated anxiety that devalues difference."

Ethan's quadriplegia, which is the consequence of a traumatic accident, is portrayed as a loss of control over his

body and, consequently, his life. His disability positions him as a dependent on others, notably Sofia, his caretaker, because of his inability to perform everyday tasks or exert physical agency. Shildrick's (2002) observation resonates with Ethan's portrayal as his dependency manifests not as a relational dynamic but as a source of personal emasculation and defeat.

For instance, the film's incapacity to reconcile interdependence with a fulfilling existence is emphasized by Ethan's plea for euthanasia. The narrative that equates dependence with diminished humanity is problematic, as it frames his desire to end his life as a rational, heroic act of reclaiming autonomy. This formulation reinforces the notion that autonomy is the sole means of achieving dignity, thereby perpetuating the cultural devaluation of interdependence.

Shildrick's (2002) critique also illuminates the manner in which Ethan's relationships are indicative of societal apprehension regarding interdependence. His internalized sense of inadequacy is further exacerbated by his dependence on Sofia which is both necessary and burdensome. The film simultaneously portrays Ethan's dependence as a lamentable condition that must be resolved, while also valorising Sofia's self-sacrifice. This dynamic demonstrates the cultural concern with corporeal instability and interdependence as identified by Shildrick (2002), which challenges the ideal of the autonomous subject.

One of the most contentious ethical dilemmas in the film is highlighted by Ethan's appeal for euthanasia. Wolfe (2010) argues that posthumanism challenges the anthropocentric privileging of human agency by emphasising distributed modes of decision-making. Ethan's aspiration for ending his life is not exclusively determined by his internal will; it is also influenced by his embodied experience, societal perceptions of disability, and the reactions of those in his vicinity. Wolfe critiques conventional humanist ethics for its dependence on autonomous subjectivity, contending that it frequently excludes individuals who do not conform to normative paradigms of agency. The limitations of humanist frameworks in confronting complex bioethical issues are emphasised by Ethan's petition, which was met with both support and resistance. Wolfe posits that posthuman ethics necessitates a transition from 'abstract principles' to an acknowledgement of the interconnected, embodied realities of life (Wolfe, 2010). Ethan's narrative encourages viewers to reevaluate autonomy as a relational, context-dependent phenomenon, rather than an isolated trait.

Ethan's petition for euthanasia is also interconnected with more general biopolitical enquiries regarding the societal treatment of disabled bodies and the valuation of life. The concept of biopower, as defined by Foucault (1978), is

particularly pertinent in this context, as it investigates the manner in which societal institutions regulate and control existence. Ethan's struggle is not merely a personal conflict; it is a confrontation with the biopolitical structures that aspire to establish the parameters of a 'life worth living.'

Butler (2004) elaborates on these ideas by examining the manner in which specific lives are rendered more distressing than others. Ethan's existence is ambiguously positioned within this framework, as it is characterised by physical dependency and societal perceptions of suffering. While his intellectual contributions and charismatic personality are lauded, his physical condition is implicitly devalued by a culture that places a high value on able-bodiedness. This tension emphasises the normative concept of the human that Wolfe (2010) critiques, in which disability is frequently depicted as a deficit rather than a legitimate mode of existence. Ethan's advocacy for euthanasia can be interpreted as a form of resistance against these biopolitical norms from a posthumanist perspective. Ethan challenges the societal structures that attempt to impose a singular definition of the good life by asserting his right to choose the terms of his mortality. Concurrently, the concept of autonomy as an individualistic act is complicated by his relational entanglements, particularly his reliance on Sofia and the legal system, which mediate his decision.

In posthumanist ethics, euthanasia poses significant concerns regarding the boundaries of life and the individuals' rights to transcend them. The ethical implications of redefining existence in terms that transcend conventional humanist categories have been the subject of investigation by scholars such as Haraway and Agamben. The concept of "bare life" as articulated by Agamben (1995) is particularly instructive. He elaborates on the exclusion of specific individuals from political recognition and their reduction to their biological existence. In certain respects, Ethan's quadriplegia and the resulting dependence render him a barren existence, devoid of the autonomy that is typically associated with political agency.

In contrast, Haraway (1991) provides an alternative viewpoint, honouring the intermingling of human and nonhuman components. This cybernetic existence is exemplified by Ethan's life, which is mediated by technology and caregiving systems. His request for euthanasia is not only a repudiation of his biological condition, but also a reassertion of his cyborgian agency. Ethan's resistance to the limitations imposed by his embodied condition is consistent with Haraway's concept of the cyborg as a figure that subverts the boundaries between human, animal, and machine (1991).

The film's posthumanist critique of humanism is influenced by its aesthetic strategies. Bhansali's visual approach, which

is characterised by evocative close-ups, chiaroscuro lighting, and opulent interiors, simultaneously emphasises Ethan's corporeality and transcends it. Wolfe's assertion that posthumanism queries normal human experience through specific artistic modes is consistent with this dual focus (2010). Ethan's voice, which is amplified by a microphone and transmitted via radio, serves as a metaphor for technological mediation. He embodies the posthumanist idea of hybrid subjectivity, in which human and nonhuman elements converge, as he offers life advice on his radio program, despite his suffering. Wolfe's (2010) observation that the boundaries of the body are not where we typically think they are is illustrated by the blurring of boundaries between Ethan's physical limitations and his expansive intellectual presence.

## V. CONCLUSION

Through the intersection of posthumanism, disability studies, and agency, this paper has endeavoured to decode the ethical and philosophical intricacies of euthanasia and disability in *Guzaarish* (2010). The film's narrative, which is centred on Ethan Mascarenhas's plea to terminate his life, transcends the boundaries of individual agency and autonomy, thereby encouraging a critical engagement with the relational and systemic contexts that characterise human existence. Ethan's narrative is consistent with posthumanist frameworks that underscore the contingent and distributed nature of agency by undermining humanist concepts of sovereignty and self-determination. The biopolitical forces that regulate disabled bodies are underscored by the ethical dilemmas surrounding euthanasia, as articulated in the film, which challenge traditional conceptions of life's value. This paper has emphasised the complexity of disability in the context of simplistic binary oppositions such as able-bodied versus disabled, life versus death, and agency versus dependency, as influenced by Foucault's concept of biopower and Butler's critique of normative frameworks. Ethan's decision to pursue euthanasia is not merely a denial of life; it is a radical assertion of his right to establish its boundaries, which challenges societal norms that prioritise autonomy for the able-bodied.

This discourse is further enriched by posthumanism, which reframes agency as relational and mediated by assemblages of human and nonhuman actors. The porous boundaries between human and machine, life and technology, autonomy and dependence are illuminated by Ethan's existence as a cyborgian figure, which is reliant on technology, caregiving networks, and legal systems. Sofia's role as a caregiver exemplifies the relational ethics that are fundamental to posthumanism, highlighting the mutual

entanglement of lives and complicating traditional caregiver-recipient dynamics.

*Guzaarish* (2010) is a poignant critique of humanist paradigms and a call to embrace more inclusive and compassionate frameworks for understanding disability, agency, and the ethics of care, as a result of the theoretical insights of Wolfe, Braidotti, and Haraway. Ethan's narrative not only emphasises the lived experiences of disability but also encourages to reconsider the preconceived notions of what constitutes a life that is worth living. In doing so, the film encourages one to imagine an ethical horizon in which human existence is viewed as fundamentally interconnected, influenced by systems, relationships, and technologies that both enable and constrain agency.

This paper concludes that *Guzaarish* (2010) provides a posthumanist reimagining of euthanasia that transcends the moral binaries that currently dominate public discourse. The critical engagement of the film and the decentering of the autonomous subject forces one to confront the ethical implications of our entanglements and responsibilities by situating life and death within a web of relationality. In an era that is becoming increasingly characterised by biopolitical governance and technological mediation, *Guzaarish* (2010) is a crucial reminder of the necessity of reevaluating the frameworks that undergird our comprehension of the human condition, life, and mortality.

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