

Fictionalised Portrayals of Organ Donation in Select Indian Movies: A Study Based on Medical Ethics

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Abstract: Organ transplantation continues to be one of the most coveted achievements of the medical field. The field has evolved in leaps and bounds, significantly improving the quality of life. This has also meant that there is a case of heightened sensitivity around the discourse of organ donation. Despite the changing iterations around organ donation, it continues to be shrouded in ill-informed beliefs and unethical practices. The entertainment industry, over the years, has been a critical determiner in shaping public sentiments around the idea of organ donation with its varied portrayals. This paper attempts to parse the fictionalised portrayals of organ donation in select Indian movies, in a bid to engage with the representational schemas that signpost these depictions. To this end, the paper looks into five Indian films—Ship of Theseus (2012), Thank You (2015), Phir Zindagi (2015) and Traffic (2016). Critiquing the highly sensationalised and hyper-romanticised nature of organ donation in these storylines, the paper argues that there is a deliberate obliteration of the ethical quandaries that engender the very act of organ donation. The paper foregrounds the idea that the unidimensional rendering of organ donation as an act of benevolence, based on an inflated notion of moral obligation, tends to look past the overbearing factors involved in the positionalities of donor-receiver, including their class social affiliations and capital. Such uninformed portrayals, this paper argues, can only serve in occluding the cultural valence that the very idea of ‘body’ and its various imaginings occupy in the Indian social apparatus.

Keywords: Organ Donation, Body schema, Bodily representation, Moral obligation, Ethics

Organ donation is essentially a social activity and, beyond the technicalities of medical processes, a transfer of life itself. Being a socio-cultural practice, organ donation frequently

suffers from the dichotomising tendency of being presented as both an act of kindness motivated by an exaggerated sense of moral obligation and as the execution of an evil nexus that plots and aids the transplantation with vested interest (Shafer et al. 34). The reality is often multidimensional, and it's difficult to pinpoint in the modern age of media-driven entertainment and information saturation. It is important to understand that transplants are “effective at two levels, one concrete and the other abstract and symbolic. At the concrete level, one transfers an organ from one body, defined as “dead”, to another, defined as “living”. In an abstract and symbolic context, an exchange takes place between death and life.” (Ben-David 14). Apart from consolidating the positionality of the body as an able “socio-cultural resource”, the discourses pertaining to organ donation have also ushered in a renewed urgency to the “generalized exchange relations between individuals and the society” (Ben-David 15). Having said that, it is nigh impossible to be certain of the fact that the structuring in and around organ donation have steered clear of ill-informed beliefs and unethical practices.

The entertainment industry, with its varied portrayals, has been a critical determiner in shaping public sentiments around the idea of organ donation. Despite the polyvalent iterations evoked by the discursivities around organ donation, it is possible to decipher a certain accruing of representational schemas that have signposted the portrayals of organ donation. With a marked reliance on overt sensationalism and hyper-romanticism, the increasing portrayals of organ donation in Indian cinema are inclined to occlude the cultural valence of the very idea of the ‘body’ and its various imaginings in the Indian social apparatus. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to parse the fictionalised portrayals of organ donation in select Indian films: *Ship of Theseus* (2012), *Phir Zindagi* (2015) and *Traffic* (2016).

This investigation seeks to illuminate the ways in which cinematic narratives reflect and challenge societal norms, while also delving into the profound existential implications of organ transplantation on individual and collective experiences. The arguments gleaned would be used to supplement the readings of the select films for study. The current endeavour hypothesises that there is a deliberate obliteration of the ethical quandaries that engender the very act of organ donation. These fictionalised portrayals render organ donation as an act of benevolence based on an inflated notion of moral obligation, overlooking the positionalities of the donor-receiver, including their class affiliations and social capital.

Organ Donation and the Question of Ethics

Organ transplantation is a surgical process which involves the transfer of an or multiple organs from donor to recipient. The process requires a donor to donate their organ to save someone else's life.

Organ transplants can be broadly classified into three: "1. auto-grafts which originate from the recipients themselves (e.g., in the case of skin or bone transplantation), 2. allo-grafts which are transplants between genetically non-identical humans, 3. xeno-grafts which are living animal organs or tissue transplanted into humans" (Albertsen 4). While the process of organ transplantation has made rapid strides in the recent decades with substantial improvement of modern medicinal apparatus, there are still rampant concerns around 'organ shortage'. "Every year, more than 5 lacs Indians need organ transplants, yet only one in ten of them are successful. Over the past many years, organ failure has become more common in India. The need for organs is greater than the supply of organs" (4 IMA News), reads the report from the Indian Medical Association (IMA), indicating the urgency in addressing the shortcomings persistent in the process of donating and transplanting organs. While a variety of factors can be attributed to this perceived shortage, it is safe to presume that a lot has to do with the question of 'ethics' that is deeply implicit and shrouded in the process of organ donation. "The ethical quandaries of organ transplantation involve "questions of personhood, bodily integrity, attitudes towards the dead, and the social and symbolic value of human body parts" (Schicktanz et al. 5). Primarily, the term donation is denoted as a generous act of giving away something significant. The model of altruistic 'donation' of organs is showing its downside as the enrolment of donors for such programs is lower in numbers coinciding with the rise of demand for organs, which added a monetary quotient to this 'act' of donation. As several researchers suggested, the saleability of organs is ramified into ill practices including coercion, organ theft and even medical negligence that leads to death. The socio-cultural disparity furthers this "harvesting of organs" (Ben-David 119). This, however, should not be taken as a decrying of the economic incentives involved in the very process of organ donation. As Nelson suggests there should be a "more modest, more pragmatic sort of approach to enhancing organ availability through judicious application of mild economic incentives" (50). This could include ensuring that supply is enhanced by providing families of recently deceased potential organ donors with various kinds of fiscal inducements, from defraying funeral or hospital

expenses to straight cash payments. People might also be willing to sell “future interests” in their organs, receiving payments in return for a binding undertaking that their organs be used for transplantation, should they happen to die in circumstances that lend themselves to this activity (50). The major issue persisting in organ transplantation is the varied and antinomian socio-cultural bearings entailed by the bodies of donors and recipients. The socio-cultural encodings that are implicit in the economies of ‘transplantation’ are often effaced in the larger scheme of depicting organ donation as essentially an altruistic act.

Allocation of donated organs is also a difficult and complex task. As there is a possibility that the fairness of this process can be corrected by power or financial incentives as the legitimacy of the decision making done even by the transplantation technicians is questionable. According to Erich H. Lowey:

In health-care ethics, the question of organ allocation is a question that involves both micro-allocation and macro-allocation. Both of these questions, however, depend upon the way we conceive obligations to one another, to the community and in turn what we expect the community to owe to us as individuals. Macro-allocation deals with the crafting of rules for what types of patients will be eligible to receive organs and how, once generically judged to have been eligible, they will be prioritised. Such patients are patients we do not know personally. They are what has been called unidentified or statistical lives. When it comes to micro-allocation we concern ourselves in allocating organs to individual patients, patients who are identified or easily identifiable. (Loewy and Loewy 131-132).

Traffic (2016) delves deeply into the complexities of organ donation within the chaotic and emotionally charged context of urban India. The film, inspired by true events, intricately weaves together multiple narratives that converge around the urgent need to transport a donor heart across a congested city to save a young girl’s life. Through its intense, real-time portrayal of this life-saving mission, *Traffic* explores critical themes of sacrifice, human interconnectedness and the moral dilemmas that arise in moments of extreme crisis. The film aligns with Orit Brawer Ben-David’s socio-cultural analysis of organ donation by presenting it not merely as a medical procedure but as a significant socio-cultural act that involves numerous stakeholders, each influenced by their own ethical and emotional struggles:

This leads to the conclusion that body organs become an appropriate socio-cultural resource for exchange, through a social agreement among people who regard death in an unambiguous and unequivocal way and find it acceptable to look upon the body as a machine composed of exchangeable parts, like the parts of an automobile. (Ben-David 20, 21)

The involvement of power and money in organ transplantation is mirrored in films. For instance, in *Traffic* (2016) the haste transplantation of superstar Dev Kapoor was possible only because of the privileges the power provides, the prospective donor's father was constantly contacted by higher officials including the MP and governor (*Traffic* 00:25:27, 00:30:13 - 00:31:13). Thus, a mediator's role is essential as they balance the interests of both the transplant candidate and the donor family. While ensuring the candidate has the best chance of receiving the organ, the mediator must also protect the donor family from any negative impact resulting from their decision. Meanwhile, the gatekeeper's responsibility extends to safeguarding the integrity of the donation process, ensuring it can be repeated in the future (24 Brawer). In *Phir Zindagi* (2015) directed by Sumitra Bhave and Sunil Sukthankar, as soon as a young boy named Sumedh Agnihotri, met with an accident and was pronounced brain dead, the social worker of the hospital is flooded with calls to donate the Sumedh's organs. Mediators must demonstrate exceptional sensitivity and be keenly aware of the arguments that are most likely to persuade the families of the deceased (Ben-David 23). She was then compelled to say that "We maintain a waiting list...This is a matter of life and death! We strictly follow guidelines and rules" (22:03-22:07). "Mediators" must demonstrate exceptional sensitivity and be keenly aware of the arguments that are most likely to persuade the families of the deceased (Ben-David 89). Similarly, the recipient's family, who waits anxiously for the heart to arrive, represents the desperation and hope that define the experience of those on the receiving end of organ transplantation, highlighting the socio-cultural dynamics that Ben-David discusses.

The acceptance of an organ from another person tremendously influences the life and self of the recipient. The recipient goes through a spectrum of emotions including gratitude to grief. The 2012 film *The Ship of Theseus* written and directed by Anand Gandhi compiled the stories of the lives of three recipients before and after organ transplantation. The first story of *The Ship of Theseus* portrays the life of a visually impaired photographer Aliya Kamal. Aliya indulged in photography after she lost her vision due to a cornea infection. She believes that

“all art evokes from the need to record the apparent, to a need to capture the essence” (*The Ship of Theseus* 00:08:53 - 56). She yearns to keep “control over the elements” of her pictures and she gains it through the help of voice-assisted camera, colour identifier etc to calibrate and capture photographs and utilises etched photographs and photograph readers to evaluate the outcomes (00:09:23,00:04:38-00:05:18, 00:01:43-00:02:18, 00:03:04-00:03:07). The images she produced are modulated through the perceptions aided by the devices. Once undergoing a corneal transplant her creativity suffers as a result of the imperceptibility due to vision provided by her ‘implanted eyes’ (00:21:14,00:28:54-00:20:32). Her inability to capture photographs that excite her post-surgically forces her to wear blindfold again, an act justified by her as “I can’t just put it on before I take a shot and then take it off, right?” (00:33:04-00:33:22), reiterating her argument she suggests earlier in the film that it is good to have limits and doubts (00:09:36-00:09:40).

In the film, the character of Aliya Kamal offers a compelling illustration of how the transplantation of a body organ can profoundly impact an individual’s sense of self, identity and relationship to the world: “Apart from the medical and technical problems involved in organ transplantation, there are also social and ethical questions that arise in the framework of the society to which ‘donor’ and ‘recipient’ belong” (Ben-David 19). Before the corneal transplant, Aliya’s identity is linked with her visual impairment. Her photography, which is informed by her unique perspective, becomes a means of expressing herself and asserting control over her environment. Her reliance on assistive technologies, such as voice-assisted cameras and color identifiers, underscores her agency and adaptability despite her disability. The corneal transplant challenges Aliya’s established sense of self. The restored vision, while offering new possibilities, also introduces a sense of disorientation and alienation. Her inability to capture photographs that satisfy her creative vision suggests that her identity is not merely a matter of physical ability but also involves a complex interplay of perception, memory and emotional response. Aliya’s decision to wear a blindfold again after the transplant reflects her struggle to reconcile her pre- and post-transplant identities. By voluntarily returning to a state of visual impairment, she seeks to reclaim a sense of authenticity and control over her creative process. This act can be interpreted as a rejection of the societal expectation that restored vision is inherently desirable and will lead to a more fulfilling life.

The second story is about Maitreya, a Jainist monk who fights against the illegal treatment of animals. When he was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis, the doctor necessitated a liver transplantation. Since he opposes animal cruelty during drug testing, he is trapped in a moral dilemma as transplantation requires him to consume more medicines. His refusal to consume medicines derived from animal testing reflects his deeply held belief in the sanctity of all life. As he points out, “Every medicine has animal violence behind it” (01:01:20-01:01:21). Maitreya takes the ‘Sansar Bhava Bhagga’ vow in which “a monk ailing from an untreatable disease can make peace with himself and choose to withdraw from life” (01:10:33-01:10:49). This underscores the tension between his moral principles and his desire to survive. This choice reflects his belief that it is preferable to die with dignity rather than compromise his ethical convictions: “To be precise, the identification of an object as a commodity is considered in the existing cultural framework” (Ben-David 74). Maitreya, however, after following the vow by starving for a long time decided to agree to transplantation as he came to terms with the fact that he is not yet ready to go (1:23:55-1:24:11).

According to David “There will always be a rarity of some objects and this rarity will cause a higher price. Each partner in exchange procedure attempts to gain maximum self-benefit” (David 52). Commodification of organs is detrimental to society as it may violate the core ethical principles including autonomy, voluntarism, informed consent, beneficence, non-maleficence etc. Navin, a stockbroker, developed reservations regarding his kidney transplantation once he came to know that a Kidney from Shankar, a bricklayer, had been stolen a day before Navin’s surgery. Navin found out that the stolen kidney was not transplanted into his body but to a Norwegian man’s. Navin, being determined to bring justice, Shankar went to Norway to encounter the recipient. The recipient argues that “A man in need of money sold his kidney. I am told it happens all the time in India” (1:58:39). To that Navin retorts that “Is it right to buy a kidney? Is it fair to use somebody’s poverty to your benefit?” (2:00:03 - 2:00:43). Navin points out the flaws in the recipient’s ethics even in purchasing an organ, let alone stealing it. The film criticises the market driven strategy of organ donation.

Navin’s journey to Norway in search of justice can be seen as a reflection of his search for meaning and purpose in the face of his own illness. His determination to bring the perpetrators of the kidney theft to justice suggests a desire to make sense of the traumatic events he has experienced: “...all emotional disturbances are constituted in a context of human

interrelatedness – specifically, contexts of emotional trauma” (Aho 45). Navin’s confrontation with the Norwegian recipient highlights the ethical complexities involved in organ transplantation. The recipient’s argument that buying a kidney is a common practice in India reflects a market-driven approach to organ donation that raises serious ethical concerns. Navin’s counterargument emphasises the importance of fairness, justice and respect for individual autonomy. This experience may have profound implications for his understanding of his own mortality and his relationship to the world:

Contemporary medicine embraces the idea of the body as an extended and individual thing, as a machine that works in a mechanical way, as an object that as such is ontologically similar to a dead body, a corpse or cadaver. (Aho 128)

Phir Zindagi (2015) delves into the emotional terrain of organ donation, exploring it through both a socio-cultural and existential lens. The film's central characters each contribute to this discourse, offering various perspectives that illuminate the ethical and existential dimensions of organ donation. Sumedh, the young college student who becomes brain dead after a tragic accident, represents the critical turning point in the narrative. His condition brings to the forefront the agonizing decision faced by his family, particularly his mother, Venu and uncle, Pradeep, who must grapple with the idea of donating his organs. This moment is poignantly captured in the emotionally charged dialogue between Dr. Aditi Rao, a social worker and Sumedh’s relatives. Rao’s pivotal question, “What would you feel about organ donation if you were the recipient instead of the donor?” forces both the characters and the audience to confront the ethical implications of their choices, echoing the socio-cultural theories of Orit Brawer Ben-David on the value of body organs and Kevin Aho’s existential reflections on health and illness (*Phir Zindagi* 00:15:15 - 18).

The film meticulously outlines the protocols for organ donation, using the conversation between the doctor and the family to address every potential concern, thereby demystifying the process and challenging the superstitions that often surround it in India. Yet, despite its thorough approach, *Phir Zindagi* avoids slipping into melodrama, instead maintaining a powerful emotional resonance that underscores the gravity of the situation. The characters' interactions highlight the delicate balance between personal loss and the potential to save other lives. The film's refusal to glorify either life or death, instead finding beauty in both, reflects a mature understanding of the existential and cultural realities surrounding organ donation.

The film portrays the act of organ donation not merely as a medical procedure but as a profound social and ethical exchange that carries significant cultural and personal implications. This aligns with Orit Brawer Ben-David's theory of body organs as "exchangeable socio-cultural resources" (Ben-David 124). Here, the value of organs extends beyond the physical and enters the realm of social relationships, identity and cultural norms: "The true meaning of life is understood when we give someone else a chance to live" (00:32:40 - 42). This line resonates with Ben-David's concept by framing organ donation as an act that transcends individual self-interest and taps into broader social and cultural values. It suggests that the donor's act of giving life is not just a physical exchange but one that is imbued with cultural meanings about life, death and human interconnectedness.

The act of donating an organ is portrayed as not just giving a part of oneself but as a profound, life-altering experience that redefines the donor's identity and purpose: "Giving new life is like living a new life yourself" (00:19:20 - 23). The film suggests that through this act, the donor undergoes a personal transformation, one that brings them closer to an understanding of the fragility and interconnectedness of human existence. A weight of responsibility comes with the decision to donate an organ: "Your one decision can change someone's entire life" (00:38:20 - 25). The film raises questions about the motivations behind organ donation and the ethical dilemmas faced by both the donor and the recipient, such as whether the decision is driven by altruism, guilt or societal pressure: "The price of taking on responsibility for attributing meaning to oneself is an anxious awareness of one's independence" (Aho 147).

In lieu of a conclusion it could be observed that despite the discursive prevalence of organ donation in movies, there has been an amassing of representational schemas that continue to be abound in stereotypes, putting forth the idea that organ donation, by and large, is an altruistic act based on an inflated notion of moral obligation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the films *Phir Zindagi* (2015), *Traffic* (2016) and *Ship of Theseus* (2012) collectively contribute to narratives that explore interplay between organ donation, identity and the human condition. Through the lens of Orit Brawer Ben-David's socio-cultural analysis of organ transplantation and Kevin Aho's existential philosophy, these films transcend their

immediate storylines to delve into deeper questions about the nature of the body, identity and the ethics surrounding life and death.

Phir Zindagi and *Traffic* highlight the socio-economic and ethical complexities of organ donation within the Indian context, where societal hierarchies and urgent medical needs shape the dynamics of who gives and who receives. These films expose the often-harsh realities of organ transplantation as a transaction influenced by social status and cultural values, while also revealing the transformative potential of such medical interventions on the identities of donors and recipients alike. The tension between altruism and exploitation is palpable, offering a critical reflection on the broader societal implications of organ donation.

On the other hand, *Ship of Theseus* presents a more philosophical and introspective examination of organ transplantation, questioning the continuity of self in the face of physical alteration. The film masterfully intertwines the existential dilemmas of its characters with the ancient paradox of the Ship of Theseus, challenging viewers to consider whether identity is rooted in the physical body or if it transcends the corporeal. Through its nuanced portrayal, the film positions the body as a site of both cultural meaning and existential inquiry, where the act of organ donation becomes a profound reflection on life, death, and what it means to be human.

The current research underscores how these films do more than just portray medical procedures; they engage with the cultural, ethical and existential dimensions of organ donation. These narratives invite viewers to consider the body not merely as a biological entity but as a socio-cultural resource and an existential vessel, where the implications of organ transplantation reverberate far beyond the operating room. Ultimately, the exploration of these films through the chosen theoretical lenses illuminates the profound impact of organ donation on both individual identity and broader societal norms, offering a compelling commentary on the intersection of health, culture and humanity.

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