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REPRESENTATION OF DISABLED CHARACTERS IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Representation of Disabled characters have always been found in Literature, whether oral or written. Along with normal characters they try to create spaces of their own in stories. But, the fictional space or position accorded to such characters is never the same as that of other standard characters. They are presented antithetically or as derivatives to the normal characters surviving at the periphery of the world of the normals. Their *raison d'être* always remains either to act as prop to the main characters or as villains. Disability is often equated with evil and portrayed negatively. This paper looks into the different aspects of representation of disability in literature.

Key words: normality, stereotype, handicapism, deformity, evil

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Stories have been invested with dis-abled or deformed characters since the origin of literature, be it oral or written, mythologies or fantasies, folk or fiction. Deaf, dumb, blind or lame characters have entered the plot to serve various purposes, as and when wished by the writers of such stories. But such dis-abled characters have always played the second fiddle to the able-bodied characters unless the story is a biography like *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller or *Joni* by Joni Eareckson where disability is treated in a positive light. In the world of fiction, dis-abled characters find their justification in accentuating the normality and correctness of the able-bodied characters by demonising or misrepresenting their abnormality or deformity, thereby reducing them as stereotypes instead of normal human beings. Such negative depictions of disabled characters in literature remain etched in our memory even long after we forget the storyline. According to Bowe: " Our memories of these and other characters often become indelible, impervious to any experiences we may have with disabled individuals in real life. Somewhere in the back of our minds we associate disabilities with sin, evil, and danger"(1978: 109).Prejudices like these lead to ill treatment of such people denying them of their equal rights to opportunities and livelihood. To fight this social inequality, treating disability from a clinical, medical or therapeutic perspective is not enough. One needs to understand and examine disability as a social, cultural and political phenomenon and how prejudice against disability is sustained through literature and other forms of culture. In this paper, I intend to examine certain cases of representation of disability in literature and show how disability is not just a functional impairment that needs to be clinically "fixed" or "cured", but a literary construct that finds its meaning within a social and cultural context.

Classical literature is the most pertinent place for examining how disabled bodied characters are irrationally and exaggeratedly presented to perpetuate certain morals and values in the society. Classics are important tools by which a culture and a civilisation perpetuate the values it cherishes. Margolis and Shapiro argue that ... "(classical literature) provides interpretation, teaches in the form of allegory, and provides models for identification and behaviour. It also gives readers materials and ideas to reflect upon, including those that promote and reinforce handicapism. Literature is a resource for society"(1987:18). In literature ranging from epics to classics to children's literature, disabled characters are not only set apart from other normal characters, but they are often seen to be plotting against innocent idealistic heroes and heroines, putting them into unnecessary hazards, difficult travails and agonising separations from beloved ones. And often without any genuine justifications. The great Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata have given us two such prototypes, immortalised though, through their Machiavellianism, namely DasiManthara and Shakuni. The names of such characters are usually very suggestive, like Manthara, the hunch-backed maid servant of Kaikeyi, the second Queen of King Dasaratha, father of Rama, or Shakuni, the brother-in-law of Dhritarashtra, the King of Hastinapur and the father of the Kauravas. The name 'Manthara' suggests a slow-witted one, unwise, selfish and narrow minded, while 'Shakuni' suggests vulture like, mean, crooked, manipulative. Disabled characters in classics are often not portrayed as real life people, rather as literary devices to suggest their potential for mischief and evil doing. They are one-dimensional and type-characters, not realised fully. Manthara is a minor character in Ramayana, appearing for a brief period, but playing a crucial role which changes the whole course of action not only of the life of Prince Rama, but Ramayana as well. As King Dasaratha was preparing for the coronation of Prince Rama, the son of the eldest Queen, Manthara arouses jealousy in the mind of Queen Kaikey, the most beautiful and beloved Queen of the King and instigates her to press the King to nominate her son, Prince Bharata as the royal heir instead. Rama, the lawful successor, along with his newlywed queen Sita, and younger brother Laxman were sent to exile to facilitate the transition of power. Ramayana, which is Rama's story of twelve years' suffering in exile happens because of Manthara, because of her instigation. Manthara, the hunch-backed woman, thus becomes associated with instigation and jealousy in the general Indian's psyche, maligning the image of any hunch-backed woman whatsoever. Manthara is of course not alone in this group, another memorable example is the character of Quasimodo, the hunch-backed villain in Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Similarly, in Mahabharata, Duryodhan deprives his elder brother, Yudhishthira from his right to the throne at the instigation of Shakuni, his maternal uncle. Shakuni single handedly guides Duryodhan through a maze of uncompromising jealousy, conspiracy, betrayal to deprive his own brothers of their rightful legacy. Like Manthara, the most conspicuously projected aspects of Shakuni's character are his lameness and his evil nature, one becoming the metaphor for the other. In the battle between Good and Evil, the disabled characters are always sided with evil forces. Even Dhritarashtra's blindness becomes metaphorical, suggestive of his inability to judge between right and wrong. In spite of realising that Duryodhan has taken the side of falsehood and injustice, he as the king refuses to see the truth. Just like the Ramayana, the catastrophe of Mahabharata was the handiwork of another cripple, Shakuni.

In literature, outer deformity is often used as a device to represent inner defects of the mind. This "twisted mind in the twisted body" is a very popular literary device to convey the evil and the sinister. The author achieves this by highlighting the deformity in the character to the extent of caricaturing it, making it a type character. In these stories, physical beauty is equated to goodness of the soul, while disability to evil. The conflict between normality and deformity is presented as the archetypal conflict between good and evil, where the evil crippled characters are hell bent on destroying the good ones, and eventually getting eliminated themselves. Such disabled and deformed stereotypes abound in literature, whether eastern or western, Indian or European. One of the most famous examples is Shakespeare's Richard III, who though not physically disabled in real life, was deliberately made a disabled character to emphasise the evil side of his personality. Byron Rogers in "Richard III: Shakespeare Was Quite Wrong" attempted to expose how Shakespeare reconstructed Richard III to equate his deformity with his villainy through some memorable lines very early in the play:

I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion  
 Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature'  
 Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time  
 Into this breathing world,.....

.....  
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,  
 .....

I am determined to prove a villain,  
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

Shakespeare presents Richard as a "subtle, false, and treacherous hunchback" guilty of ruthless murder even of children to achieve his mean ends.(Margolis and Shapiro, 1987:19)There are innumerable examples of such biased portrayal of disability in literature which reinforce the reader's negative attitude towards them. In fact, our direct and personal acquaintance with disabled characters is so limited and restricted by transportational or social barriers, that our perception of them is shrouded with ignorance and misperceptions. Even the family and the society at large regard disability with a guilty complex and conceal it as a shame, thereby preventing outsiders of having any interaction with them. This gradually engenders a perception of fear and suspicion which is used by literature to portray them as evil and malicious characters.

Having such an attitude towards deformity and disability, it is no wonder then, that the tragic fates of such characters do not perturb us, we accept them as cases of divine justice or poetic justice. We rarely regard disabled characters as human beings, capable of feeling and desiring like any other self-respecting individual. The classic case of divine (in)justice meted out to any disabled character is that of Oedipus. Sophocles makes Oedipus a lame character. But this lameness can also be intended to point to a moral malaise deep within Oedipus. His disability can be symbolical of his anomalous, deviant and doomed relation to his parents and the kingdom of Thebes. After his ascension to the throne, Thebes is afflicted with disasters one after another. The root of all the ills plaguing Thebes was Oedipus himself. Probably, Oedipus' lameless was just a metaphor for his abnormality, his aberrant existence. Oedipus commits two of the worst cultural taboos: killing his father and sleeping with his mother. Such unimaginable transgressions need to be punished with maximum punishment. And what could be worse than permanent blindness? Oedipus blinds himself to atone for his sin, for he believes he doesn't deserve to see the disgrace he has wrought on this world. But what is significant is that Sophocles justifies blindness as a form of punishment for Oedipus's wrongdoing. Such an attitude dismisses blindness not as a disability, but a form of atonement for a wrongdoing.

Apart from this negative portrayal, handicapped individuals are also represented as 'pitiable receivers', who are helpless and have to be cared and cured by able-bodied people for their survival. Such perceptions often anger and frustrate disabled people who do not want to see themselves as dependants, but as self-respecting independent individuals being a part of mainstream society. Our negative and paternalistic attitude often becomes obstacles for such differently abled individuals struggling for more normal, productive and satisfying lives. Instead of having a patronising attitude, we should be aware that disabled individuals also have a number of abilities with which they can provide for themselves.

Disabled people are a minority group like other social, ethnic, religious, linguistic groups who are discriminated against by the mainstream society in their attempts to secure the right to life, freedom, education, shelter and employment. Much of this discrimination is based on negative image factors, most of which operate sub-lingually and are learned in early childhood from books and mass media. Gartner has compared this discrimination to racism in the following lines:

Just as whites have imposed their images upon blacks, and men upon women, people without disabilities have imposed their image upon people who are disabled. These images have told us not only what is beautiful-and right; they have also warned us that the image of disability is ugly- and evil. (1984, p.31)

Even though disabled people have legal right to survive in the least restrictive environment in the society along with able-bodied people as equals, that hardly is the case. Social justice and equality cannot be assured, unless teachers of literature like us address those issues of misinformation and misrepresentations. That needs to be done by discussing and explaining the symbolism of disability and deconstructing the moralistic meanings assigned to it. Otherwise individuals with physical impairments may hold us equally culpable in restricting them in their pursuit of their right to live, work, obtain education and even survive.

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