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A DIACHRONIC APPROACH TO DISABILITY STUDIES IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Disability is now considered as one of the marginalizing factors besides Race, Class, and Gender. According to scholars in the field of Disability Studies, disability is everywhere, be it literature or life. So, discrimination and marginalization of the disabled is evident in both the places. This review of literature tries to explore these issues across English literature from England and India. In English literature disability can be traced from the old English period to the modern, and postmodern age to find out how was the representation of disability across the ages. Disability found its place earlier in the western academia than the eastern ones. In India, Disability is portrayed with a moral or religious perspectives. But, with the passage of time and turn of the century the representation of disability changed from moral or religious viewpoint to a more realistic and scientific approach. Thus, because of disability, a community is formed by these people who are oppressed, suppressed, and separated from the society or made the 'other'. So, a study on the representation of disability will help us to understand the predicaments of disabled people and encourage the society for their inclusion.

Keywords: Disability, Suppression, Inclusive Society, Representation, English Literature, Indian English Literature.

Introduction

'Disability' is the term applied by people to mean and address an impaired person. Impairment or impairments are lack of something that can range from a missing body part to neurological disorder, means from physical to mental disorders. Impairment/s can be found in a human body, based on which the society concludes whether the person is able or disable. Now, ability has political incarnations as it is judged by the society. A normal person has to conform to some norms and perform social duties expected from him or her, if not, they are termed as disabled. So, there is a difference between what is being referred to as Impairment and Disability. Impairment is the lack in a human body, a person may be born with some anomalies in the body or may have acquired it by time or accidentally. On the other hand, disability is what the society constructs out of the impaired body. Thus, impairment and disability can be compared with sex and gender, as sex is biological and gender is social construct. And, as we have seen that persons with gendered identities are marginalised and

suppressed, similar traits have been seen in case of disabled persons, they are marginalised, oppressed, stigmatised, and segregated from the society. Hence, disability is a form of suppression like race, class, and gender and for this reason scholars in the academia and the activists in the field work hard for their development and find ways of inclusion of the disabled persons. A study to find out the tropes of representing disability across literature is important to understand the society and culture. By doing this survey of literature, various ways of marginalising a disabled person can be traced and find out probable ways of inclusion of these people in our society and culture.

Representation of Disability in British Literature

In the Medieval English Literature persons with disability was represented as monsters, and sinners. Their presence in a story was to facilitate the saints and establish them as the 'messiah' of God. In the epic *Beowulf*, Grendel and his mother are portrayed as "nonhuman, supernatural beings rather than persons with disabilities" (Wheatley 19). The concept of "loathly lady" in the period was considered as disability or monstrosity. It was "a threatening representation of monstrous female sexuality and earthly appetites who appears in several late medieval romances" (Wheatley 19). One common example of this kind of representation is Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*. Besides, William Langland dealt with the difficult social issues relating to disability and poverty in his *Piers Plowman*. The Book of Margery Kempe, earliest autobiography in English, presents mental illness of Margery who suffers from postpartum depression having mystical visions. In *History of the English Church and People* by Venerable Bede showcases the miracles performed by John, Bishop of Hexham and cures a person who was mute from birth. So, in this period the representations were mostly followed by the religious model of disability where the disabled persons were sinners or monsters and they are suffering for the deeds of their past birth.

In the Renaissance period the representation of disability was changing in some points and the authors have tried to trace the varied living experiences of disabled persons. Shakespeare's *Richard III* where the king *Richard III* is deformed because of his premature birth and Leontes, whose murderous monstrosity is being presented in the play *The Winter's Tale*. Besides, in the Long Eighteenth Century (1660-1832) there is an ambiguity in the representation of disabled characters of this period because of the impairment is not specified. Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin talked about function impairments; while Mary was pointing out such impairments leading to oppression, on the other hand, Godwin was of the opinion that it "characterize a decadent and effeminate aristocracy, the nature of evil, and a corrupt body politic" (Joshua 50). Apart from that, Captain Whiffle's effeminized masculinity is a form of function impairment in Smollett's *Roderick Random* and Hervey's bisexuality is presented in "terms of a disordered and grotesque body, and his political influence as toothless and impotent" (Joshua 54). This kind of representation of disability in the period provokes us to explore the variety in the form of sufferings and oppression that disabled have to suffer.

The long nineteenth century (1789-1914) has some remarkable portrayals of disabled characters like – the crippled boy Tinny Tim in Cratchit in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, the most famous "madwoman" Bertha Mason in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, the Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Count Dracula in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Anne with intellectual disability in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*. The portrayals of disabled characters in the period incites questions on "ability" and "disability", as well as the "social construction of work, marriage, gender, sexuality, and family" (Holmes 72).

In the Modern age, disability does not only mean physical limitations. It included the psychological disorders and physical trauma into the discourse of disability. One such example is that of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, where "a blind, transgendered speaker laments the sickness of the modern life" (Davidson 74). Virginia Woolf's essay "On Being Ill" deals with the author's own sufferings of mental breakdowns and depression. Apart from that, the world war originated many disabled characters like – Sir Clifford in Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; Jack Barnes in Hemingway's *The Sun also Rises*; Septimus Smith in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Besides, developmentally disabled Benjy Compson in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*; mentally disabled Lennie Small in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* are popular examples. The representations of this era produced narratives around the anxieties of the modern age and connect disability with it.

The postmodern era has more elaborately presented the concerns of disability. In this period disabilities reflected the anomalies in the postmodern society created by the world wars. Some of the examples of this kind of representations are – Hamm in *Endgame*, Winnie in *Happy Days*, amnesia of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's other plays like *Molloy* presents Molloy and Moran with physical impairments. Some other variety of representation of Disability like the character of Beloved in Morrison's *Beloved* that showcases "black disabled subjectivities" (Murray 94). Besides, the disability narrative in postcolonial literature provokes question on "normality", "disability" and the seeks answer from various theoretical perspectives. Crippled Philoctete in *Omeros* by Derek Walcott, along with Anita Desai's *Clear Light of the Day*, Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*, Coetzee's *Foe* and *The Life and Times of Michael K* are some of the names that portrays disability.

One can find the representations of disability from the Medieval age to the Postmodern period and even later. A change in the portrayal of disabilities, from the moral or religious model to the socio-cultural model of perceiving disability has taken place. With all those portrayal across literatures, it can be said that disability is located in our society as well as in our culture. Scholars can find issues of ignorance of representation and discussion of disability and with some solutions like inclusion of the disabled can help to find representation everywhere, be it society or culture.

Representation of Disability in Indian English Literature

It is already noted that Disability studies found its way into the western academia early and as a result their society and culture has found itself in a position to accommodate disabled person much earlier than the eastern culture and academia. So, to understand the representation of disability in the eastern culture and academia, the Indian English Literature provides us an opportunity to trace various issues and tropes of disability.

The historicity of disability in Indian literature can also be found as early as *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana*, the great Hindu epics. Popular examples can be Manthara, a kumbha or the hunchback maid of Kaikeyi, the third wife of King Dashratha in *Ramayana*. She is a hunchback woman whose bodily representation perfectly exemplifies the hidden traits which comes out at the time of giving suggestions to Kaikeyi to avail her pending boons from the king that resulted in exile of Rama for 14 years along with Sita and Laxman and Bharata would be enthroned to the kingdom. Thus, the tragedy occurs in the epic because of a "disabled" woman (Kaur 181). While Dhritarashtra, the blind king of Hasthinapur in the *Mahabharata* is blamed for his visionless and selfish dream for his son whom he wants to be the next ruler instead of the deserving Pandavas or specifically Yudhishthira, the elder brother among the Pandavas and whose vow to tell truth throughout his life and maintain social justice made him a suitable candidate for the throne. But this discrimination resulted in the cruel war of Kurukshetra between the cousins i.e., the Pandavas, sons of Pandu and the Kauravas, sons of Dhritarashtra (Kaur 183). Shakuni, brother-in-law of Dhritarashtra, was portrayed with impairment in one leg which reflects his inner 'monstrosity' as he acts as the catalyst in destruction of the Kauravas. Thus, one can understand that the representation of disabled characters in these two epics clearly incites a thought that disabled people are curses to happy life and prosperity.

Apart from the epics, we can also see representations of persons with disabilities in Indian English Literature. Ved Mehta's autobiography *Face to Face* (1957), focuses on his own life experiences being disabled is considered as pioneering in the field in India. Autobiographies are first-hand account of the experiences and hence considered as most authentic description. In disability studies, most of the influential works are biographies and autobiographies of disabled writers whose thoughts revolutionized the field. For example, Simi Linton's *My Body Politic* is a remarkable text which changed the thought process of the non-disabled authors about disability in the UK.

Apart from this, there are some significant novels which have protagonists or characters with disabilities which have paved the way for disability studies into Indian academia. For example, Baba is an Autistic child in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and Bimla (Bim), his sister is the constant caretaker. The novel showcases the issues which a family has to undergo when there is a disabled child is present in the family. Bimla's premature ageing and stress suggests what a carer or care giver has to sacrifice and suffer.

In Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), Sufiya Zinobia suffers from psychic disorder and hearing-impairment and for that her mother nicknamed her 'shame'. Sufiya's mental retardation symbolizes innocence and purity of her mind. She is constantly attacked by the society because of her mental condition which affected her psyche and thus made her mentally unstable. So, it can be said that, her condition and the society contributed to her suffering and it is unclear whether the society or her mental condition caused her becoming the shame. Besides, Rushdie's other novels, like - *Midnight's Children* has multiple characters with superhuman qualities, such as Salim Sinai whose power of telepathy and sense of smell makes him a blessed person. On the other hand, Salim's twin Shiva had powerful knees makes him a war hero. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the titular character Moreas (Moor) suffers from progeria, a rare condition for which the physical body ages twice of the exact age. Rushdie's portrayal of disabled character shows variety of impairments from physical to mental. The novels make us aware of the social-cultural conditions surrounding disabled persons and perfectly exemplify how the society reacts to these disabled persons and mark them as 'shame'.

Nachiketa or Alu who is having a mis-shaped head, draws attention of his uncle Balam, a phrenologist who studies skull in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* (1986). Polio-afflicted Dinu has a limp in *The Glass Palace* (2000) and for that his hobby of photography is hampered. Brit in Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* (1991) suffers from brittle bones, a developmental problem wherein the bones does not grow much. Lenny is a polio victim in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy Man* (1989). The novel puts the partition of India-Pakistan in the center and draws a parallel with Lenny's growing. The horrifying tales of the partition has marked a permanent place in the hearts of the citizens of these countries for which they suffer mentally and physically. Julia is portrayed with the agony of the hearing impairment in Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* (1999) which may thought as a punishment for her extra marital affair.

Tehmul with intellectual disability in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991) lost both the legs in an accident and gets the nickname 'Lungraa'. So, he is devoid of his rights and people look at him with sympathy and feel pity. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* showcases a Beggarmaster in the roads of Bombay (Mumbai) who uses disabled person to beg on streets and generate income. While, *Family Matters* (2002) deals with Nariman Vakeel who is suffering from Parkinson's disease. The novel raises question against the families having disabled person and how they treat with the person. A disabled person is like a burden to the family which should not have been on their shoulder.

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) presents Animal who walks in his all fours because of the incident of gas leak of "that night" for which his spine got twisted and his backside rose higher than his head. Along with his parents many people died and suffered because of that. The gas leak incident turned Khaufpur into a village of disabled for the living persons and a cemetery for the dead. Animal was used by the local leaders to spy on the outsiders who have come to the village to provide medical help. The novel shows how Normal people in society ignore the emotions of a person with physical abnormality. The novel is based on the Bhopal, MP gas leak tragedy which and killed countless turned a generation disabled. Postcolonial scholars interpret this incident as mass murder event in which a developed country turned a third world country crippled and it also highlights their dominance over others, a form of neo-colonialism.

Sushmita Bagchi's *Children of a Better God* (2010) showcases some children who suffer from autism and other impairments and their education in a school. This novel showcases how children with disability is treated in the family and variety of reception of a disabled child. Further, when the disabled child is born to a family, the family tries to get rid of the child but as the child grows older and somehow manages to arrange for own living then the child is taken back in the family. Such is the burden of disability in a family is portrayed realistically in the novel. Bagchi's another novel *Beneath a Rougher Sea* (2016) deals with a male protagonist who is psychologist and caters to a number of patients daily. But one day, the protagonist himself becomes a patient of psychic disorder. So, the care giver becomes the cared and showcases the hardships of psychologically impaired persons.

Jaisree Misra is an Indian author who writes in English. Disability for her is a well experienced topic which she has dealt in two of her novels i.e., *Ancient Promises* (2000) and *A Love Story for My Sister* (2015). *Ancient*

Promises has some autobiographical elements as it portrays a girl who was born with special needs, referring to Misra's own daughter. In *A Love Story for My Sister*, Misra deals with Stockholm Syndrome that leads to violence and often death for one of the female protagonists. Besides, Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* (2011) is an autobiographical bildungsroman that addresses similar issues. The autobiography was adapted into a film by the name *Margarita with a Straw* which was released in 2014 and it was well received and critically acclaimed by the audience. *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy is a latest addition to the list that deals with 'abnormal' gender identities.

Thus, in Indian novels, disability has been represented as stigmas and it occurs to the person as the result of Karma or misdeeds of the previous birth. Hence, the disabled person is bound to suffer the pangs and agonies of being born with impairments or acquiring it. But, recently a change in the discourse of disability has been seen and authors are now portraying serious issues of disabled person in their writings.

Conclusion

This survey of literature to find out the representation of disabled persons across literatures points out that disability is a common phenomenon and locating a person with disability in the society is normal. Besides, these representations highlight the fact that disabled persons are being segregated and marginalised in all the ages and across cultures. They were thought as the 'other', notwithstanding the prevalent norms and fulfilling the criteria of a social/normal man or performing the social role. The problem of the disabled persons seems to be reducing as various organizations and Governments are working for their development in every aspect from equal civil rights to a private workplace. Lastly, it is upon the society to accept these people as part of the society and give them place in culture. As a result of this acceptance, psycho-social status of disabled persons will improve.

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