

## The Problem of Disability and its Portrayal in Indian English Fiction

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### Abstract

Societal attitudes towards persons with disability have changed from time to time. Various factors contribute to these changing attitudes. Gender, education, religion, occupation, income, nationality have a significant impact on the level of disability consciousness. The present research paper will investigate the level of consciousness of different types of people towards disability in the selected Indian English fiction which deals with the theme of disability to understand the various psychological and sociological dialectics that take place in the life of a person with some kind of disability. The approach is interdisciplinary as it aims at assimilating the psychological and sociological aspects in analyzing the fiction of disabled people. It will also try to problematize the various linguistic construct applied to people with disability.

**Keywords:** Disability, postcolonial writing, feminism, community, fundamental values.

Disability studies remain a comparatively unexplored area in India in spite of the fact that it has evolved as a separate new critical discipline of study in the West. Disability studies takes into account the previously ignored subjects related to physical or mental impairment. It has not gained importance and legitimacy as a separate discipline of study as there is a lack of adequate attention on the issue from inter-disciplinary paradigms. This has resulted in the tendency to study disability merely as an offshoot of other specific disciplines such as medical science, psychology, social work, community health, sociology, labor economics, humanities and the arts (including literature) and that, too, in a rather piecemeal and parochial fashion. Particularly disability remains unexplored in literary representations. Societal attitudes towards persons with disability have changed from time to time. Gender, education, religion, profession, income and nationality play a significant role on the level of disability consciousness. In the Indian novels/writings in English, disability is yet to gain currency in academia as a critical method/parameter. Disability has so far remained a relatively less significant area of study and research as compared to other modern approaches like feminism, Marxism, post-colonialism, gender studies, subaltern studies and women studies.

Indian English fiction on disabilities has its own way of expressing one's societal pressures and personal struggles characterized by trials and triumphs. Disability has been considered as an index of marginality. People with disabilities often see obstacles in their path and have to conquer them to move forward. The social model of disability sees it as a social construction that leads to a feeling of inferiority and ignorance. Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Jaisree Misra and Anita Desai have effectively projected disabled characters into mainstream literature. Though many a reading has been done on these writers, one aspect of scrutiny that has been overlooked is the politics of representation of the intellectually disabled in their works. Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991), Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), Jaisree Misra's *Ancient Promises* (2000) and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* introduce strong disabled characters who play a pivotal role in the thread of the text. These works produce forms of subjectivity within specific discursive fields and the power relations promote particular meanings, interests and even forms of resistance.

As literature informs and informed, it often includes the sites of people who suffer any kind of imperfectness and how this is represented in literature. The analysis of the literary texts on disability draw

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out the tension and indifference that is constantly at play in the Indian context between modern ways of knowing disability and the ways in which they are projected and presented in literature. The textual analysis also inspects the role of narrative prop that disability plays in the literary texts and recommend a more context sensitive as well as critical application of disability studies that frequently tends to further itself with a universalistic claim.

Literary Study on disabilities have contemporary relevance as it helps physically or mentally impaired people to be represented in the mainstream literary society and to establish their equality and enhance their self-esteem. It is therefore worth pursuing to have a better understanding of the lives of people with disability and generating not sympathy but empathy for them. The visibility of the authorial role in the text is one of the primary layers to be considered in respect of the literary representations of the people with disability as it opens new vistas on exploration of the social and political hierarchies which serve as controlling forces in writer's creation. Literary representations of disable-bodied characters are significant because it reveals the culturally ingrained way of seeing and perceiving the disabled Other. Disabilities, it is observed, in literary representations are "allegorical symbols" and a trope to infer culturally imbued meanings and represent cultural myths like—asexual or sexlessness, ugly, evil, unattractive, cursed, unproductive, useless, and so on. The "body" becomes a metaphor and a site for numerous discourses. The bodies that are different become a cause of concern as it reflects the other side of the reality in the binary "either/or" system. The subsequent exclusion of the "non-normative" from the mainstream signifies "biopolitics" demonstrating the re/alignment of "power" as it assigns socio-cultural meanings on the basis of groupings or identity categories. Terms like "abject body" and "sexual perverts" emerges from these re/alignment of power by a paradoxical exclusion and inclusion which reduce the disabled into a "state of exception". Reducing the disabled to a "state of exception" is an abuse of power which is tantamount to using the body as a tool of exploitation and abuse. Elucidating the use of bodies, Agamben says the body of a slave is primarily to sustain the life of the master. The body of the slave as oscillating somewhere between *zoë* (bare life) and *bios* (qualified life), which is to say that the body of the slave does not have an independent existence but is part of the body of the master which completes it or qualifies it for life. Likewise the disabled are regarded as incomplete, and in all practical matters they do not have an independent existence.

Disability studies is an inventive area with sound intellectual and professional foundation in social sciences, humanities and rehabilitation sciences. Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* is a typical fictional representation of disability as it captures some of the finest aspects of the survival of disabled people. *Trying to Grow* presents the anchorless position of the differently-abled that forces them to a state of seclusion and identity crisis leading to their ultimate surrender, despite their consistent efforts to overcome the stigmatic notions of the society. Their relegation to the margins and the resultant feeling of alienation are sometimes further reinforced by the well-ingrained codes of social behavior of their respective communities. Kanga, surprisingly, shows no awareness of such stretching of the boundaries of the form of the novel. His use of autobiographical material is conventional. *Trying to Grow* does not challenge readers to make major adjustments in their modes of perception, the kind of challenge, for example, that Didion's *Democracy* or Roth's *Zuckerman* novels pose. In *Trying to Grow* there are a number of moments, events, and episodes that perhaps have autobiographical sanction, but they do not work as effective props to further the narrative. Kanga's failure to transmute the fragments either of imagination or of life into meaningful building blocks of narrative is evident from a number of episodes; the death of Sera as a flatiron falls upon her head, for example, and Brit's use of a large volume of Shakespeare's complete works as a weapon of self-defense are poorly conceived. The entire Tina episode is rendered completely incredible, as is the suggestion that Sam may have deliberately engineered his own death by walking across a busy New York highway blindfolded. All in all, the fictive elements in the novel are poorly conceived. In spite of such weaknesses, however, *Trying to Grow* is one of the most delightful books to be published in the 1980s. The prose has extraordinary charm, fluency, and wit and exhibits remarkable control. Kanga creates a number of memorable portraits. His women - Dolly, Sera, Jeero, Tina, Ruby, Amy - are skillfully drawn and come across as uniquely alive and memorable, even though his men (with the exception of Daryus) lack finer definition and compared poorly with his women. The novel is full of rippling, rich humor, flashes of wit, and a number of endearing characters. It

is also an extremely tender, moving, and poignantly touching account of a young man who insists on living his life on his own terms. Daryus's handicaps inspire him to reach out and demand his share of what life offers everyone else. Kanga delves deep into the crevices of his protagonist's existence and lays bare every hurt, heartache, and agonizing remembrance of desires that were thwarted and remained unfulfilled and, with remarkable courage and honesty, maps the growth of a mind that must grapple with the excruciating pain of being different mother, who accepts her son's disability with grace, and to Tina, his deaf cousin.

As with any bildungsroman, the principal focus of the plot is the young man's attempt to break free of his necessarily protective parents and to carve out an independent life. In the process, he discovers his own awakening sexuality in encounters with a neighbor, Cyrus, and also with Cyrus's girlfriend, Amy. Cyrus appears to be everything that Brit can never be, and Brit's infatuation is immediate and intense. But the relatively idyllic world of childhood soon passes. Dolly moves to America and marries; Brit's father accompanies her and walks into oncoming traffic; Tina is sold into prostitution; Brit's mother dies; Cyrus and Amy decide on marriage all potentially melodramatic but recounted simply. The author seems to be clearing the decks for his narrator because at this point in the novel Brit sees himself as free to move to England. He does so, and his life, in a sense, begins anew. Kanga's next book, *Heaven on Wheels*, is something of a travelogue that records his early impressions of the Great Britain to which "Brit" moved. In short, he is very favorably impressed by what he sees, offering frequent comparisons with India that portray his mother country as backward and insensitive, especially to the needs of the disabled. His Parsi friends in India ask him to send them favorite foods that had become less obtainable after independence: "And I thought how ironic it was that this is what the Empire had meant to its most loyal subjects—something to salivate over." He utilizes the points in his itinerary to make sociological or political observations, many of them relating to his own situation as a gay disabled immigrant from a former colony. *Trying to Grow* has been translated into four languages and forms the basis for the screenplay that Kanga wrote for the film *Sixth Happiness* (1998). The film, directed by Waris Hussein and produced by Tatiana Kennedy, was made in Britain and financed by the BBC, the British Film Institute, and the Arts Council of Great Britain. Between these two major efforts, Kanga wrote and presented "Double the Trouble, Half the Fun," a program on gays and lesbians with disabilities, and "Taboo," which were produced on Channel Four in Britain. He also wrote the play *A Kind of Immigrant*, which was produced by the Graeae Theatre Company, the leading theater group of the disabled in England. He has subsequently produced a Channel Four travelogue on the Coted' Azur and the possibilities of travel for the disabled.

Nariman Vakeel from the novel *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry is a classic example on the special problems related to the process of ageing which brings with it a multidimensional process of physical, psychological and social changes. With these perceptions in his mind Mistry narrates the story of an old man aged 79, affected by Parkinson disease. He faces health problems, his familial relationship as a father and as a grandfather is spoiled; and that affects him psychologically day by day throughout the novel struggle for survival in a country like India. Mistry paints on large political canvases, yet for me what elevates his talent is the way he portrays the deeply personal. Richly remembered details and the idiosyncrasies of all his characters are what draw the reader into the universal themes of his stories; interconnected lives, promises and dreams, fighting fate, and shining a light on fractured families resonate with the reader no matter where they come from. Fathers and sons, sibling rivalry, aging parents and life-challenging illness such as Parkinson's are all tackled in Mistry's work. Even on rereading his books, I was struck by how it makes me examine by own life. As part of the so-called "squeezed middle classes" in Britain, *Family Matters* is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand the pressures and fissures in their own family. One is never let off the hook.

Though Anita Desai resist simple answers to the question of how gender intersects with disability in postcolonial worlds, but she offers provocative instances of the transgressive potential of "different" bodies. Anita Desai uses family as microcosm for larger national concerns. The novel "*Clear Light of Day*" traces the tensions of a Hindu family reunited in the family home, where one sister, Bim, who has stayed there caring for autistic Baba, represents Indian culture, while the other sister, Tara, represents more Western values. The novel also criticizes the controversy of women's roles in society by exposing hardships that Desai

demonstrates through the influence of the western culture, the desire of true gender equality and the social roles which women are forced to obey. Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*.

In the novel, *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai explores the ambivalent role of characters with disabilities, both as sites of transgression and as repositories for cultural tensions in a postcolonial world. In it, Desai uses the family as microcosm for larger national concerns, as she does in many of her fictional explorations of postcolonial themes (for instance, in *Fire on the Mountain* [1977] and Baumgartner's *Bombay* [1988]). The novel traces the tensions of a Hindu family reunited in the family home, where one sister, Bim, who has stayed there caring for Baba, represents Indian culture, while the other sister, Tara, represents more Western values. In essence, the family dynamics as the sisters confront their differences and struggle to balance old and new worlds become a microcosmic exploration of larger national concerns, establishing a "parallel movement between British withdrawal from India and the progressive emptying out of the Das home . . . [making] a distinct point about the erosion of cultural frames of reference" (Mohan 1997, 49).

In the midst of their negotiations exists their brother Baba, who is developmentally disabled. At one level, Baba represents the naive dream of detachment from postcolonial negotiations of power, i.e., that one can somehow remove oneself from such negotiations. He is literally left out of almost all arguments between his sisters and thus exempt from the anguish caused by such altercations.

But the slippage of identity, which occurs when the sisters struggle to understand one another's narratives, is fostered by Baba's own fluid movement between symbolic identity categories. If on one hand he reflects Bim's passive resistance to change (he is addicted to order, ritual, to the known and familiar), he also embodies Tara's internalization of Western values, articulated in the American music to which he compulsively listens. On the surface, then, his disability marks him as uniquely able to simultaneously participate in imperial standards and to reject them by escaping reality. Because of this dual role, he becomes the focus of his two sisters as they attempt to mediate between old and new cultural norms. At one point in the first part of the novel, Tara persistently asks Baba if he is going to go into the office to perform duties of which he is blatantly incapable; later that day, when one of his records develops a skip, he rushes off the property only to witness a man beating a horse and to return, disoriented and deeply upset, "as if he were an amputee" (Desai 1980, 15). In many respects, he is: that which is absent in him serves to justify why Bim has not changed and to explain why Tara recoils from "those silences and shadows" representative of "Old Delhi decadence" (15). Literally, then, it is through his body (his silence, his compulsions, his ghostly presence) that the two sisters attempt to negotiate a balance between old and new India.

His "amputation" has gendered connotations, as well. Baba is feminized by his disability in overt ways: he is not self-supporting, he does not participate in the public world, and he is very gentle. But Baba also lives in a semiotic world, resisting entry into the symbolic by means of his music and his mutterings. Graham Huggan suggests that "silence and music in several postcolonial texts can be seen . . . as providing alternative, non-verbal codes which subvert and/or replace those earlier, over-determined narratives of colonial encounter in which the word is recognized to have played a crucial role in the production of and maintenance of colonial hierarchies of power" (1990, 13). Like Baba, Aunt Mira, the alcoholic aunt who cared for the siblings when they were children, retreats into the semiotic and challenges social order with wildly transgressive acts—for instance, running naked and drunk in public. Aunt Mira does not fill a culturally-sanctioned role, for she is not mother, wife, or worker. Rather, like Baba, she hovers at the edge of a "new" Indian society. Both characters act as constant irritants, refusing to fit neatly into either old or new cultural paradigms. In fact, their inability to fit in either category reminds us that such polarities (an old versus new world order) are simplistic, unrealistic, and unrealizable.

To that end, Baba and Aunt Mira have subversive potential; they function as the evil eye that observes and resists inclusion. Though Baba and Aunt Mira are in many respects passive figures upon which tensions are worked out, the novel itself resists resolution and suggests, instead, that the process of negotiation will be ongoing. After one of her final outbursts of resentment, Bim comes to recognize that "It was Baba's silence and reserve and otherworldliness that she had wanted to break open and ransack and rob" (Desai 1980, 164). And yet Baba himself—whose story is never told first-hand, whose motives and memories remain a blank in the sisters' efforts to reconstitute their pasts and thus their present—remains silent, a third space which

is indeterminate and unrepresentable. He is that Stranger "whose languageless presence evokes an archaic anxiety and aggressivity" by highlighting the opacity of language in a story where language is all (Bhabha 1994, 166). Those who do not speak, or who do not speak with the dialect of the new nation, are dangerous, and their threat to nationhood must be contained. One means of containment is making static an "extraordinary body." This, I argue, is what happens with Baba: initially dangerous because of his fluid identity, he is neutralized when the sisters fix his identity as silent shadow, recipient of their dual care, loveable burden. Thus, together they situate him in a particular role as dependent and knowable. Towards the end of the novel, Desai momentarily reconsiders the idea of Baba as fixed in his difference from the sisters, offering a fleeting hope of connectedness in place of differentiation. In this scene, Bim brings Baba his tea and felt an immense, almost irresistible yearning to lie down beside him on the bed, stretch out limb to limb, silent and immobile together. She felt that they must be the same length, that his slowness would fit in beside her size. . . . Together they would form a whole that would be perfect and pure. She needed only to lie down and stretch out beside him to become whole and perfect. Instead, she went out. (1980, 166). The opportunity of this moment—the impulse towards familiarity if not recognized similarity—is rejected, and the transformative power represented by Baba is negated. In the very next scene, Baba is absent while the sisters "paced the terrace" (166).

Desai recognizes the temporal nature of that unity and reconciliation—as Tara reminds Bim, "it's never over. Nothing's over, ever" (1980, 174). I agree with Trinh T. Minh-ha that "Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing" (1989, 83), but in this novel, the "Clear light of day," that sense of community and connectedness which Bim experiences during a musical gathering at the novel's climax, tends to elude Baba, whose "face was grave, like an image carved in stone" (Desai 1994, 182). Unlike his sisters, mobile, fluid, struggling to negotiate the changing nature of postcolonial India and their roles within it, Baba ultimately is cast in stone, fixed, excluded from the dialectic of nationhood.

In both texts, physical, mental, and gender-based stigmas create and maintain a status quo where normal bodies do the necessary work of assimilating to new social patterns while arbitrating old power dynamics. To that end, the representation of disability, because it remains seemingly stuck in a subordinate relationship to able-bodiedness (which comes to include patriarchy) is problematic. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison examines the ways in which Africanism has historically done the work of constructing whiteness in American literature and concludes that "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (1990, 52). Similarly, the characters with disabilities in the two postcolonial texts I examine exist in a binary that excludes them even as it depends upon them to develop a status quo.

But we are reminded, as well, that that status quo is tentative, fluid, and subject to constant revision and that "out of bound" bodies foster that revisionary process in important, even radical, ways. Borrowing again from Morrison's argument, who notes that "A writer's response to American Africanism often provides a subtext that either sabotages the surface text's expressed intentions or escapes them through a language that mystifies what it cannot bring itself to articulate" (66), I want to suggest that a similar mystification occurs in *Clear Light of Day* and *You Have Come Back*. Though Desai and Gallaire-Bourega might not be fully capable of articulating the transformative potential of disability, whether physical, mental, or gender-based, their respective representations nonetheless resonate with cultural and political implications. Both return repeatedly to figures of disability and, in *You Have Come Back*, to the figure of the sexualized woman, to explore the unfixed nature of hierarchies, national identity, and power paradigms. For both, disability is an "echo, shadow, and silent force" which hovers at the margins of their texts (Gallaire-Bourega 1988, 48). This presence, this shadow, always there, demands a closer reading and more careful consideration. Because however concerted the endeavor to stabilize disability as the subordinate term in a normal/deviant binary, the potential of characters with disabilities to disrupt comfortable, comforting, and ultimately unreliable images of totality reminds us of their transgressive potential, however unarticulated, however mystifying—indeed, perhaps because unarticulated and mystifying.

The early Indian novels in English are a narrative of a nation in making, and the novelists are raconteurs of history in the cusp of change. The clamour for freedom from colonial yoke interspersed with discourses and narratives of identity and nationalism in a land of diversity. However, the likes of Firdaus Kanga remain as a marginalized writer not just because of his disability and sexuality but also because his writings were rather 'radical' in the sense that they were not in tune with the traditional themes and cultural values but peaks of the personal concerns and desires. Kanga contributed towards further evolution and growth of Indian English novel by placing the marginalized at the centre of the narrative. In the prioritization of texts and writers on the basis of mainstream national parameters, the dialectics of nation and nation-building plays a crucial role. To write about disability was, in a way, a defiance of the existing social structures and power relations in the literary field.

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