

Metaphorical Narrative of Disable Character in Indian Disability Writings

Author(s), MOHAIMINUL ISLAM

Abstract:

The study will deal with the phenomenon of Indian disability writings where disable characters have largely been functioned as a metaphor of social collapse. In western society disability has been described as a 'symbol of cultural ruin' (Mitchell and Snyder 13), while in Indian context it also often has been treated as synonymous with "deceit", "mischief" and disabled people are often treated as the "children of a lesser god" (Ghai 51-52). So the study will try to demonstrate that how Indian disability writers communicate disable character's emotions not only by directly portraying their emotional expressions but also by a metaphoric representation of feelings in the texts. In order to scrutinize more precisely Indian disability writings specific metaphorical narrative of disabling character, the study furthermore considers how the metaphorical representation contribute to the Indian disability community a typical scenario of disabling character. By doing so, the study will offer very little insight into the social model of disability which locates disability not within the disabled individuals but within the socio-cultural matrix that surrounds them. In India, this socio-culturally

EASIJ

Accepted 1 December 2019
Published 8 December 2019
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3567123



constructed negativity and stigmatization marginalizes disabled individual in a more problematic manner. In the autobiography, *Fallen, standing: My Life as a Schizophrenist*, Reshma Valliappan has effectively projected an intellectually impaired character into the mainstream writing. In her text, while she has been rebelling against all attempts to pigeon-hole and discipline, she recounts her sense of being different as a teenager. However, now as far as the representation of the issues related to the true voice of disabled individual has been either erased or represents deviant and deficient bodies as a metaphor of social collapse in the mainstream of Indian disability writings.

Keywords: Disability, Metaphorical Narrative, Indian Disability Life-Writings,

About Author

Author(s), Research Scholar, Department of English,
Pondicherry University, India.

(Corresponding Author) Email: mdmohaiminul@gmail.com ,
mohaiminul.res@pondiuni.edu.in

Introduction

The notion of disability prevails challenging to determine. At the simplest level, the term disability usually defines a situation of intellectual, cognitive, psychiatric, neurological, sensory or bodily impairment that substantially restricts a person's participation, movements, senses in social and economic activities. "The Disability Services Act (1993) defines 'disability' as meaning a disability which results in the substantially reduced capacity of the person for communication, social interaction, learning or mobility and a need for continuing support services" (<http://www.disability.wa.gov.au/understanding-disability1/understanding-disability/what-is-disability/>). In recent disability theory, Kudlick (2003) and Wendell (1996) write "a person's experience of impairment is increasingly understood as moderated by cultural and social expectations and ideas of what is 'normal' are seen as constructed" (Buckingham 420). From a long time across the globe, in the history, these people with physical differences (deviant bodies) have been functioned as a metaphor of social collapse, and Indian disability writers have been narrated a typical scenario of these deviant and deficient bodies. For instance, in *Rangbhumi: The Arena of Life* (2010), Munshi Premchand has illustrated how a person with disability has been oppressed in Rural India because of his visual impairment. The study encounters the blind Surdas and his narrative from his life to death and the hardships. He suffers on the account of his place in the working class society - that of a farmer. This is so apt to see in the entire book that how the narrative of a disabled character's life is playing itself in its arena and in many shapes, forms, and emotions.

However, this paper basically emphasises on the issues related to the representation of the unique experience of the people with physical differences in Indian literary texts. It has been projected by using limited literary texts. Basically, it has been trying to cover some Indian disability autobiographies and memoirs to frame the result of this paper. It has illustrated the metaphorical narrative of disable character in some of the most important and celebrated Indian disability life-writings, such as *The Blind in India and Abroad* (1944) *Fallen, Standing: My Life as a Schizophrenist* (2015), *No Looking Back* (2014), *One Little Finger* (2011) and *The Other Senses* (2012).

From the etymological point of view, narrative has been the organizing metaphor of the self in dialogical self-theory (Hermans, & et al. (1992) cited in Meira and Ferreira 293), but in contemporary, the assumption of the narrative mode of meaning is that human beings assign meaning to their lives by organizing their experiences in the form of stories (Meira and Ferreira 293). A metaphorical narrative in the mainstream of Indian literature has led us to think differently about the people with physical differences. The paper tries to examine how Indian disability writings are a huge frame through which it makes meaning of our lives. The study also pursues how this different way of thinking has informed a theoretical understanding of a narrative disability approach and consequently has opened a space for different ways of working in the society. For example, in *The Blind in India and Abroad* (1944), Subodh Chandra Roy narrates how he has started his academic life with the help of his parents. He is known as a founder of 'All India Lighthouse' and found it in 1941 in Calcutta. This is an institution for the people with visual impairment. With the help of some disability activists, he runs this institution to teach the blind people how they will overcome from their present situation and live an independent life. He states that:

The blind are not necessarily different from the sighted because of the accident of their blindness. They are normal individuals with their own particular characteristics, who have overcome their first great obstacle through character and through patience. Having achieved this, they are on the highway to overcome greater obstacles than will the average man. But this has all to be recognized by the world of sighted men for theirs is the initial responsibility for the education of the blind. It is they who must help the blind children and adult in their first steps; not by shielding them but by teaching them how to be independent. (Roy IX-X)

Furthermore, there is an another autobiography *The Other Senses* (2012), written by Preeti Monga, who has described how she has been considered as naturally inferior due to her visual impairment and therefore either avoided or subjected to excessive sympathy. She faces lots of difficulties, challenges, and failures in her life, but with the assistance and encouragement of her parents, she plays her best shot at facing all cruelties without shame.

She tries to learn how to get the best out of her disability. She always tries to look for possibilities, and focus on every positive she can dream of.

This study tries to trace the evolution of narrative in Indian disability writings. It considers the implications of social constructionism and its political effects. It also completes the discussion by focusing on narrative theory. Over the years, narrative theory has become increasingly concerned with historical, political, and ethical questions (Phelan and Rabinowitz 2). In this paper, the metaphor in narrative has been shown in a more specificity than usual.

Metaphorical narrative of disable character mainly focuses on the types of tropes used in Indian disability writings and the determinations for which they are manipulated. It also offers how each of us carries different stories that stories shape who we are. It also influences the steps we take in life. In the autobiography *Fallen, standing: My Life as a Schizophrenist*, Reshma Valliappan illustrates why readers might be curious about the story of a person with intellectual disable individual. She assumes whether her story has been squeezed out which could be brought forth to be of help and assistance in people responding to and taking action towards the problems and concern of her lives. So the research in the invitation to be curious about how we read to the story, what we notice, what we miss and how we can be more conscious and aware of how we work with the story and the impact this might have in our work.

However, by using metaphorical point of view in Indian Disability writings, the research has found new meaning in the life of disabled characters by understanding, reading and rereading the stories. Imagine that each of the incidents represents not only a life experience but also shows the adventure of a differently abled character.

I've been 'treated' for long time now. Been counselled, been in various camps, a rehab camp...I don't want to spend the rest of my life doing that again, even if it might help. I am very stubborn and can't help but refuse it. Refuse any more therapy or counselling or treatment or whatever the fuck they want to call it. I simply want to live. I have lost enough of those years. Just having to have learnt

to deal with my schizophrenia symptoms has taken me a lot of time.

(Valliappan 10)

Sometimes she would probably be locked up inside her room, in which she wants to run away and lost in her own world. Inside the locked room, she would not know what she is missing because she would not be living in the same world. Here narrator shows how a person with physical difference (deviant body) has been subjected to the process of 'othering' out of the simplistic assumption that this bodily or biological difference is the culmination of individual fault or defect. She is among one who lives with this kind of anger and hatred towards the world. That's why, she is in a dilemma about whether it is the world that let her down or she let her own world down, or that she wasn't meant for the same world at all (Valliappan 11). In this confusion, the author has used multiple sceneries of suicide attempts in a few incidents where she has been seen as cutting herself. The pain and blood oozing out used to make her feel free, alive and liberated. In addition to that, she says she wants this 'family blood' to be disappeared from her entire body, but she simply wants to live in her own world. A close reading of this text reveals that the author has used certain narrative techniques to resist the issues of cutting herself. Apparently, it seems like a mere suicide incident but when we look at it from the critical point of view, we can sense the using of metaphorical narrative, where attempts have been made from author sides to avert the dreadful relationship between her (disabled) and the world. And because of this, this metaphorical narrative undoubtedly addresses extensively the process of socio-cultural construction of disability.

Reading of this life-writing also surface the fact that instead of taking care of a daughter, the parent pushes their children into the hell (rehabilitation center) to take care of. A rehabilitation center is a facility that seeks to help individuals recover from a variety of ailments, some physical and others caused by substance abuse or mental illness (<https://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-rehabilitation-center.htm>). The people are exceedingly misinformed about rehabilitation center. People don't know some of the things about rehab. There are many trainers in the rehab center, who provide the lion's share of treatment, addiction counselors. In many states, they are not even required to have a college degree or trained people. But people would think and say once mad always mad. These

intellectually impaired people can't handle stress and their own depression. These people need to be on meds forever. Reshma Valliappan has explained the truth of the intellectual disable individuals. She says the people at that place might think that her need for being alone is a sign of being withdrawn and depressed and they fear this person would do something dangerous. But Valliappan writes that "the mentally ill are not dangerous. It is that pseudo-spiritual-new-age-wannable-doing-good-for-society-crap which is dangerous" (Valliappan 64). It has been seen in the rehab center where there are many volunteers who say there is nothing wrong with her. "She did everything and was completely fine with us. She just liked being alone" (63). For instance, she continues by stating that:

It's very easy for people to condemn a mentally ill. She did not get a relapse because she was unstable. She was driven into the state because nobody wanted to be the least bit accommodating. She didn't want to join them for a drink because she knew she should not be drinking. So she spent time cycling by herself, going out and doing her own things and her art. (63)

But for this reason, the so-called normal people used to call her withdrawn and depressed. In a minute, if they have found that the person has a history of mental illness, they will immediately inform his/her caregiver to take her out of the place. This is what people used to do with the people with intellectual disable individual. "This is what society does. This is what the world still continues doing. The stigma, the disappointments, the discrimination, the injustice just because one has a label of being mentally ill is evident and has always been there. But no one would want to talk about it or address it" (Valliappan 63-64).

It's important to point out that severe contemporary researchers are studying the phenomenon of Indian disability writings where disable characters have widely been operated as a metaphor for societal collapse. Generally, it finds little or no explanatory value in the metaphorical link with disabled individuals. The reasons for disabled individuals have to do with genetics, disease, nutrition, and personal history (including accidents) and it appears to have little or nothing to do with the people with physical differences. We all don't know when and how will get an accident and permanently become a differently abled character. For instance, in the autobiography *No Looking Back* (2014), Shivani Gupta

described how she became physically disabled. At the beginning of her true story, she informs her readers that last night she was in a car with her boyfriend, but at early morning she had found herself in a hospital bed. Before that night she was not like ordinary people. Last night accident made her physically impaired. For this, she has to face lots of problems in many places. Especially she has described how she was denied access to various work-places because of her bodily impairment. Shivani Gupta writes “I had never thought about disability before my accident. Neither had I known anyone who was disabled. Disability had meant social work sessions at school and a feel-good factor from having assisted a disabled person in crossing the road” (Gupta 45). Martand Jha in his “The History of the Indian Disability Right Movement” writes that:

These people were considered to be of little use to society and hence their concerns were severely disregarded. Many people thought of disability as the result of someone’s previous life’s sins and thus held them responsible for their present condition. This absurdity led to various forms of injustices in India. (Jha 2016)

Many disability research scholars and activists might have explained what perhaps the best is for disabled individuals in India, but it is sporadic who has addressed why most of the disability people were either seen as beggars or in better case they were associated with the field of music. In the western society, these things were started to change after World War II, when thousands of soldiers returning home with several kinds of disabilities. Martand Jha writes:

No such thing happened in India. Most offers of assistance from Indian society toward its disabled population were viewed as charity rather than providing legitimate rights to PWD. Even the families associated with a disabled person were looked down upon and scrutinized in many ways by their relatives and neighbors. In many cases, this led to families disowning their disabled family members; disabled children were all too often left in orphanages. A severe kind of “shame” was associated with disability. (Jha 2016)

The world still remembers Adolf Hitler, only a few decades before he was trying to attempt to eliminate the disabled population in Germany, due to his belief was that people with physical differences were of no economic use. In India, for politicians, the rights of disabled individuals are not an important issue because deviant bodies are not considered as a vote bank as these people with physical differences have no voice and such leaders like the caste movements and women right movements. In this juncture, Reshma Valliappan writes

Indian law states that people with mental illness cannot travel in an aeroplane unless they are sedated...They can't vote, have no say in their treatment and don't have the same right to education as others. Many of these rules are unconstitutional, but nobody is willing to change these archaic rules.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reshma_Valliappan web: 21/01/2019)

If we imagine that each of the incidents that happened with physical disability represents the true-life story, and their personal experiences will understand how disability has been functioned as a metaphor of social collapse. They are usually caught up in a rather thin story, care, dependency and materiality that focus on only a few of the many life experiences. As researchers, our first job is to read the story and orient it as one of many possible stories reading with that attitude helps us notice when people make implicit or explicit reference to events that wouldn't be predicted by the plot of the problematic story. This process does not take away problematic stories. The problematic stories often have a different meaning when they are only one strand of a multi-strand story.

Bibliography

- Buckingham, Jane. "Writing Histories of Disability in India: Strategies of Inclusion." *Disability & Society*, Vol. 26, No. 4, June 2011. 419-431.
- Ghai, Anita. "Disabled Women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism." *Hypatia*, Vol 17, No 3, 2002. 49-66. Print.
- Gupta, Shivani. *No Looking Back*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2014. Print.
- Jha, Martand. "The History of India's Disability Rights Movement." *The Diplomat*, 21st Dec. 2016. Web, 12th Jan. 2019.
- King, Christopher R. (trans). *Rangbhumi The Arena of Life*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010. Print.
- Monga, Preeti. *The Other Senses*. New Delhi: Roli Books Pvt Ltd, 2012. Print.
- Mitchell, T. David and Snyder, Sharon L. (eds.). "Disability as Narrative Supplement." *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. United States of America: The University of Michigan, 2000. 1-13. Print.
- Meira, Liliana, and Ferreira, Tiago. Narrative and Image: Metaphors of the Dialogical Self and the Problem of Spatiality. *International Journal for Dialogical Science*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2008, 291-300. Web. 11th Jan. 2019.
- Phelan, James, and Rabinowitz Peter J. (eds.). "Introduction: Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Narrative Theory." In *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Print.
- Roy, Subodh Chandra. *The Blind in India and Abroad*. Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1944. Print.
- Valliappan, Reshma. *Fallen, Standing: My Life as a Schizophrenist*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2015. Print.

Cite this article:

Author(s), MOHAIMINUL ISLAM (2019). "Metaphorical Narrative of Disable Character in Indian Disability Writings", Name of the Journal: Euro Afro Studies International Journal, (EASIJ.COM), P, 28 - 37. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.3567123, Issue: 2, Vol.: 1, Article: 3, Month: December, Year: 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.easij.com/all-issues/>

Published by

