

A Brief Reading of Disability in Ruskin Bond 's *The Eyes Have It*

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Abstract

*The perception of disability has changed over the years. Disability is a complex phenomenon which is not restricted within the medical discourses but has extended extensively in fields like humanities and social sciences. Further, with the rise of disability studies, there is a paradigm shift in the plethora of existing knowledge about disability and disabled persons. Disability is seen as a social and political construction which gives it an ideological strand. This article would reconsider the perspective of disability in the short story *The Eyes Have It* by the popular author Ruskin Bond.*

Keywords: Disability, identity, the social and political construction of disability.

As long as non-disabled people retain the power to represent our reality, impairment will always mean at best a cause for treatment and cure, at worst a life not worth living.... It is this approach which leads to segregation and exclusion—and ultimately to the assumption that our lives are not worth living and that we would be better off dead, or not being born in the first place.

- J. Morris,

Impairment and disability: constructing an ethics of care that promotes human rights.

Disability studies is an emerging field of interdisciplinary studies which looks into the concept of disability from a variety of perspectives. Converse to the traditional thinking which posits that disability is a pathological condition, contemporary researchers have argued that it is also a social and political construction. According to the *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary*, the term disability refers to an illness, injury, or medical condition that makes it difficult for someone to do the things that other people do ("disability"). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's definition of disability looks into the social model of disability and diverges from the prevailing medical model. According to Garland-Thomson, "Disability is a representation, a cultural interpretation of transformation or configuration, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions" (06). *The World Health*

Organization defines disability in an inclusive way considering both the social as well as the medical model of disability:

"Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives." ("Disabilities")

Literature dealing with disability or disabled persons dates back to the days of *Mahabharata*. *Viklang*, a Sanskrit term is often used to denote disability in India. There is ample evidence of *viklang* characters in Indian mythology. For instance, *Dhritarashtra*, the king of the Kuru kingdom was born blind. Even in Greek mythologies, there are representations of disability through such characters like *Hephaestus*, the Greek god of fire who is crippled and thus falls categorically into the section of disabled. *Teiresias*, the prophet at the kingdom of Oedipus is also a disabled person as he is devoid of any vision. Disabled people are often situated at the periphery of society and marginalized to a great extent. The discourses pertaining to disability always reinforces disabled persons as *others* in a broader social and political context. Disability is predominantly associated with the politics of power and how power is controlled or channelized by the able-bodies over the disabled ones. In this article, I would attempt to outline the concept of disability in Ruskin Bond's short story entitled *The Eyes Have It*.

Ruskin Bond is a well-known figure in India and across continents as a writer of children's books. His works are impregnated with ecological concerns, nature, non-human presence and at times it also deals with the more serious aspects of human life in a subtle way. Bond as a writer of short stories delicately touches the finer emotions of the reader's heart by portraying the various shades of emotions; sometimes in the form of love and at other times through innocence of childhood adventures. He has written over five hundred short stories and articles that have appeared in magazines and anthologies. Bond received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992, the Padma Shri in 1999 and the Padma Bhushan in 2014.

The Eyes Have It by Ruskin Bond is a most engaging short story that delineates a train journey and its delicate experience shared between two strangers who are sightless. The unnamed narrator of this tale is an interesting man who likes to spend his travel hours by conversing with strangers. In fact, he considers this inclination of speaking with unknown fellow-travellers as a kind of fascinating 'game' (05). At the very outset of this story, we find that the narrator feels anxious as when a girl gets into the compartment of the narrator as the train stops at Rohana station. Though the narrator's eyes were 'totally blind' yet he pretends to see the girl and also tries to start a conversation with her. The narrator asks the girl about her destination and gets to know that she will get off at Saharanpur. The narrator's mind was filled with doubts that whether he would be successful enough to prevent the girl from discovering that he was blind. The story takes an interesting turn when the narrator asks the girl about the scenario existing outside the train's window. The girl retorts to the narrator:

‘Why don’t you look out of the window?’. This was certainly a problematic question for the narrator as the world that existed outside the train compartment was equally dark for him as it is inside the train compartment. Trying his best to pretend that he could visualize the moving trees but was unhappy as he is unable to find any animals outside, the narrator vividly portrays the outside world with his mind’s eyes. He also tries to appreciate the girl’s beauty by remarking that, ‘You have an interesting face’. It is interesting to note that people with disabilities always try to conceal their deficiencies, the lack that keeps them isolated from the able-bodied ones. In this short story, the narrator’s utmost concern to conceal his disability echoes how disabled persons live a traumatized life with the fear of manifesting their own identity. Crossley's observation may be cited here to understand the social concept of identity: " ‘social identity’ refer to forms of categorization which link individuals to a broader social grouping, for example, ‘women’ or ‘the working class’, whilst ‘personal identity’ refers to the various ways in which the individual demarcates their self, or is demarcated, as a unique being with a distinct body, biography, situation, and so on" (145).

The element that makes disability more interesting than any other area of interdisciplinary studies is perhaps because of its wide representation in fiction and other forms of literature. Characters like Robinson Crusoe or Captain Ahab are perfect examples of prototypes embodying gallant and virtuous traits. However, disabled characters have been always associated with villainy or evil. In the words of Lennard J.Davis, “ Beautiful (and noble, gentle, or bourgeois) characters should be morally virtuous; crippled or deformed people are either worthy of pity or are villains motivated by bitterness or envy.” (45) Bond’s *The Eyes Have It* subverts such notions about disability. The protagonist of this short story falls for his fellow-traveller, tries to conceal his blindness and tries his best to impress the girl. All such attempts of the narrator are presented with a touch of innocence and with no malicious intentions. The ending of the story, however, explicates a much different meaning. The departure of the girl at the arrival of Saharanpur railway station creates a void in the heart of the narrator. His mind’s eyes have perhaps had a better glimpse of the girl and perhaps the ‘perfume from her hair was tantalizing’ in the narrator’s mind (05). The unreciprocated love for the girl and her memory was all that the narrator could gather from this train journey. The story could have ended with this note of despair but Bond gave it a new dimension altogether as when the narrator came to know that his fellow-traveller, the girl was ‘completely blind’ from the man who had boarded the train from the Saharanpur railway station and entered into his compartment.

Disability is also aligned with society and gender. The fact that the girl in *The Eyes Have It* did not disclose her blindness may be understood from the social construction of disability in India. Disabled people have been always placed in the margins of the societal structure. Especially, if the disability is linked with the female sex it becomes more difficult to survive in the all-pervasive patriarchal social structure with the majority of abled individuals. Thus, for a disabled girl, the problem of being disabled is perhaps more difficult as it deals with the body and also it is linked with sexual orientation and gender construction. Thomas J. Gerschick argued that disability plays a big role on processing and experiencing gender, and people with disabilities often suffer stigmatization towards their gender, since their disabilities may make their body representation excluded by normative binary gender representation. (Gerschick, Thomas J 33) In the case of Bond’s short story, the girl in context

tries to conceal her blindness but what becomes ironic is that the narrator is also a blind person about whose disability the girl remains unaware. The story ends with the revelation of the girl's disability by one of the fellow-traveller who boarded the train at Saharanpur station and informed the narrator about the girl:

“It was her eyes I noticed, not her hair. She had beautiful eyes- but they were of no use to her. She was completely blind. Didn't you notice?” (06)

The Eyes Have It by Ruskin Bond delineates disability from cultural and social perspectives. At the very outset of my article, I have quoted that disability is a representation, it is a cultural construct determined by society. Disability studies emerged from the movements of the disability activists in the United Kingdom during the 1970s who argued against the medicalization and pathologization of disability. A social model of disability was thus formed following the movements initiated by the disability activists. Indeed, in its initial days, disability studies scholarship focused on the manifestation of disability in literature. As Cynthia Wu suggests, “It was a focus on ‘representation’ through which disability studies in the arts and humanities gained an institutional foothold” (07). Bond's perception of disability as reflected in this short story encompasses the social model of disability. It is by the virtue of Bond's imagination and literary excellence that such complex phenomenon like disabilities is represented with a blending of humour and pathos much like the essays of Charles Lamb.

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