

Revisiting The Making Of A Nation: Death, Disease And Disability In Rohinton Mistry And Bapsi Sidwa

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Abstract

Disability Studies and Medical Humanities have emerged as iconic branches of Humanities Studies. In times like this, where diseases have defined normalcy in life, one is forced to revisit the paradoxes of ability and disability. The pandemic has in a way reinstated how people interact with each other, and constructed a brand-new manner of living, one in which we are handicapped from doing the normal. Hence, the times demand a revisit into the construction of a Democratic nation like India that has been constructed and deconstructed, drawn, and redrawn, handicapped and fractured by historical events like Partition in 1947, the Sino-India war in 1962, the Indo Pakistan war, and the consequent liberation of Bangladesh, followed by the dark days of Emergency and Indira Gandhi's assassination. A vast amount of literature in India has brainstormed through themes of communal disharmony, loss of home, civil war, displacement, trauma, and memory. But in these novels which are often categorised as Partition or Post-partition and studied under the broader spectrum of themes mentioned in the above lines, one often misses the tropes of disability, disease, and death. Thus, my paper aims at recollecting the underlying thematic concerns of death and disability in two groundbreaking novels is *Such as A Long Journey* (1991) by Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1988). Both the novels intersect closely with concerns of disability and deconstruction of the nation and national identity and mirror a discourse for redefining Partition and Post-partition literature.

Keywords : Disability, death, partition , post-partition, ableism , race , identity , nation , citizenship.

Disability is a medical term defined as a state of impairment whether physical or mental in relation to the usual standards. The usual standards are a set of permanent modules that is accepted as 'normal' in a society. In medical understanding, disability may hamper the usual ability of a person from doing everyday activities, which may include body functioning and mental cognitivism. However, disability can also persist on a metaphysical level that plays a role in the underlying structure of society, by which it is created and developed to marginalise a set of people from the other. This hegemony of the 'normal' is also a political metaphor for a country born out of Partition, like India. The 1947 communal violence was a marker of the kind of rupture that had infested the country. This was in a way an inability to look at humanity as a whole. Manto was a pioneer at exploring the mental rupture that had intricately woven into the lives of people. His "Toba Tek Singh"(1955), "Khol Do" (1948), and "Thanda Gosht" (1950) are classic examples of psychological dismemberment at the cost of once human dignity. Hence, disability as a metaphor mediated through Partition literature while 'death' as an obvious implication lurked in riots, rape, and abduction making a larger ethos of communal bigotry. Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) also meditates on the immobility of Baba and Bimla in a manner of interdependency in a post-Partition family. Baba is psychologically impaired and although every other character is witnessing change and mobility Bimala and Baba are estranged from change and normalcy, they seem to oscillate between the past and present nuances of Old Delhi. Lamenting over a past that is now lost, Bimala is also disabled in a matrix of mental immobility and stagnancy. Partition literature is laden with metaphors of death and disability as dual markers to the upsetting political events and rupture in lived experiences. In this exhaustive

canon, Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidwa have been the pioneering Parsi voices of the post-Partition era. Both the writers have touched on aspects of death and disability in a manner that is beyond metaphoric mechanism. It is at the heart of the cultural experience and symbolic nuances that compose the plot of each novel. Gustad Noble's displaced spine is a significant of the fissures drawn through the country, a story of betrayal between people who had fraternal sentiments erstwhile. Gustad's friendship with Major Billimoria is also shrouded around tropes of friendship and betrayal under the larger rubric of social disintegration. Just as an abled body is identified as a whole, integrated and syncretic, a landmass with a singular identity is a structural whole. But such a wholeness was repeatedly battered with political interests. The emphasis on the nation and national fitness plays into the metaphor of the body.

“If individual citizens are not fit, if they do not fit into the nation, then the national body will not be fit” (Disability Studies Reader). The categorization of fitness and the national body as a perfect embodiment has been challenged through the representation of the protagonist. He is an expatriate from the beginning for his historical identification with the Zoroastrian culture and his anxiety around changing politico-economic conditions of the Parsi community in India. Gustad Noble is hell-bent upon his eldest son's admission into IIT, because of the uneasy lurking apprehensions in the society of the 1970s. In Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Ishvar is also a victim of the bureaucratic medical apparatus brought in by the Indira government during 1975 Emergency India. Ishvar contracting gangrene in his legs due to sterilisation and poor diagnosis resulting in amputation is critically commenting on how disability is a profoundly ambivalent relationship with the culture.

"Disability pervades the literary narrative, first as a stock feature of characterization, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (Mitchell, 47) Surely, Rohinton Mistry uses this device to explore a resistance towards politically established normalities that invade an individual body. The accident at which Gustad was physically disabled, Billimoria and Ghulam Mohammad had miraculously rescued him from the place. However, Gustad is unable to deliver loyalty to Billimoria when he needs Gustad to deposit a large amount of money into an account. Gustad is apprehensive of Billimoria's shady allegiance to the secret service with the government. Gustad's inability to deliver the money is his inability to be loyal to his friend. This in a larger context, echoes the critical position of a Parsi in Indian society- their vested interest with mercenary and banking hegemony. Mistry's title evokes T. S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' where he elaborates the long journey taken allegorically through death and demise to spiritual rebirth. The journey is perilous for the Parsis who have suffered an identity crisis and alienation. Eliot writes,

Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,

We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,

But had thought they were different; this Birth was

Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,

With an alien people clutching their gods. (42)

The journey of Magi, who is of Zoroastrian faith welcoming the birth of Jesus, installing a new faith in the world, is laden with deathly symbols and 'alien people'. Mistry is apprehensive of death and purification in Dilshawnji's last rites. Alamai restrains everyone from sponging the corpse with gomez because it is an outdated ritual. But her dramatic weeping is seen as an act of a 'domestic vulture' by Gustad. Gustad is certain that Dinshawji has been released from his misery. The chapter involving the death of Dinshawji is layered with tropes of Parsi cultural eccentricities - purity and pollution binaries- washing hands before performing kustis-covering the head -quiet prayers making Nusli fidgety. But Gustad is taken under the spell of the 'dead language'. Death of language and culture, displacement in an alien land, and shifting dictums of a relationship dominate Mistry's understanding of a life circle. This destabilised life of Gustad is as rotten as a disease and the trope of death is allegorical to the attainment of spiritual liberty. Gustad visits Billimoria in jail where he describes the man of his admiration as "nothing more than a shadow." Jimmy's ghastly face and shrunken diseased body reflect upon post-independent India's bureaucratic corruption.

Tehmul is a stock character, interestingly tweaked to represent the agency of a disabled person in a post-Partitioned society. Thus he has been mechanised into a metaphorical device to induce humour and empathy for a mentally challenged person in the backdrop of Indira Gandhi's political interests in the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971. Tehmul is beaten by the prostitutes, he is also pawned into sacrificing his nails for a superstitious ritual performed by Dilnavaz for her daughter's recovery. Tehmul was a victim of traditional medical treatment which left him

'langra' (29) forever "condemned to years on crutches and walking sticks, with nothing to look forward to but a life of pain, their bodies swaying frighteningly from side to side while they strained and panted and heaved in their pitiful pursuit of ambulation."(iii). Tehmul's sexuality is explored as queer and unrequited. His act of touching the plastic doll in a sensuous manner is a prompt at the repressed agency of sexuality in a mentality-challenged subject. The " illness provides the opportunity for the reassertion of masculinity, but only as insofar as an illness is made into the obstacle which the subject must overcome to access normative categories of gender and sexuality."(381)

Bapsi Sidwa's *Ice Candy Man* is narrated from the perspective of a disabled child. Lennie's world is distressed with admonitions of the 1947 Partition. The advent of Partition alters and ruptures the lives of people around Leenie. Her place as a Parsi in society gives her the advantage of being an objective spectator, unbiased in her opinions and observations. Although the agency of Lennie's disability has not been explored to its fullest potential, her disabled subjectivity is a marker of the meta-narrative of the Indian subcontinent. Lennie's exploration of the adult world, of Ayah's and the Ice Candy Man's flamboyant flirts wrapped in poetry and subtle body gestures, is juxtaposed to the restricted mobility of Lenny. Lenny is at the dispense of Ayah's interaction with the world. But also her vibrant presence throughout the novel is a rebellious presence for a four-year-old child with polio. Perhaps the writer who has also suffered the fate of her protagonist deliberately challenged her repressed voice in a compelling narrative with tragic urgency. "Lenny can be compared to the persona that Chaucer adopts in his Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, rendering credibility by being almost a part of the reader's consciousness...With the wonder of a child, she observes social change and human behaviour,

her persona a source of sharp irony," comments Novi Kapadia. Lenny's omnipresence which is also unbiased because she is a Parsi onlooking the Partition is a counter-narrative to the often pitiable, passive existence of a disabled character. Her disability is far seeping in the cultural nitty-gritty and has implications greater than mere metaphoric existence. Lenny's betrayal to Ayah "dredging from some foul truthful depth"(23) in a childish nonchalant mistake, strips Ayah of her dignity, in the body and the soul. Her encounter with the idea of a "fallen woman" is carefully explored in her conversation with Hamida. The word fallen itself is figurative of the mutilation and annexation of a female body by the male. This kind of disabled body is only metaphorical and not illustrated in detail. On questioning Godmother about why Hamida was a "fallen woman", she replies "Hamida was kidnapped by the Sikh." The sheer violence propounded on the women's body in the making of a nation is only explored in omissions and silence. The Ice Candy Man witnesses no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women's breasts."The dismemberment of a woman's body is synonymous with the masochistic frenzy over annexing another's territory, humiliating and dishonouring an entire faction. Bapsi Sidwa has meticulously voiced themes of rape and abduction through a child's narrative. It is a powerful tool because the child is itself "lame" and a Parsi which makes her doubly marginalised and a bona fide chronicler. Urvashi Butalia in her seminal work on India Partition, *The Other Side of Silence* comments, "In the desperation of flight, the weak and vulnerable- the old and infirm, the physically disabled, children, women - often got left behind." (Chap.3) Juxtaposing the diseased, disabled, women and children Butalia conforms that these few were a negligible lot whose stories have been treated as a peripheral narrative. It is literature, that gives space to such characters through its colossal imagination and narrative technique.

Hence, Lenny unlike Lennie of *Of Mice and Men* is not simple, stagnant, and hungry for sympathy. She is dynamic and evolving from a child into an adult through her bildungsroman as most of the novel unravels in post-Partition time. Lenny cannot forget the atrocities she has witnessed on the streets of Lahore, nor can she retract the chameleon nature of the Ice Candy Man. Unlike Steinbeck's disabled, destabilised Lennie who tells George in utter dismay,

" I forgot", Lennie said softly." I tried not to forget . Honest to God I did, George."(5)

Sidwa's Lenny is an aware, assertive spectator of a horrendous event and yet mixes with the nation like the "sugar in the milk" and with " decency and industry sweeten the lives of (her) subjects."(Chap.5)

In a nation where "human worth is measured by its relative utility", characters of Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidwa have challenged desire and permissibility by creating resistance in the environment in which they are situated. At the very onset of Sidwa's novel, Col.Barucha asserts s "If anyone's to blame, blame the British! There was no polio in India till they brought it here!".He goes on to describe his relationship with the disease as "first personal involvement with Indian politics."(Chap.2.)Hence, politics is allegorically understood as a disease like "maggots" infesting the very heart of humanity. Lenny is certain that "one man's religion is another man's poison" (Chap.13) The feeling of "utter degradation" is set against the backdrop of her disability and disloyalty towards Ayah. Dr Paymaster in Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* is apprehensive of the disease that is "incurable" that is the "diseases of countries, of families, of theological dogma, that had fatal outcomes."(Chap.11) He continues to comment on East Pakistan, "East Pakistan is steering diarrhoea of death...Death is flowing there unchecked, and

the patients will soon be dehydrated." His observations may seem factual at the first instance but leave deeper connotations on the ever-changing nature of geopolitics in the Indian subcontinent and its aftereffect in the lives of human beings. Gustad is aware of the medical metaphors of Dr. Paymaster. He calls America a physician turning blind eye to the virus of violence spread by Pakistan on its eastern part, which is now Bangladesh.

Death and Disability work as two sides of the same coin in the larger rubric of literary responses in the post-Partitioned Indian subcontinent. It is stitched in the very history of humanity and displaced lives. The protagonists here are not "solely limited to socially created encounters with exclusion." And hence, the authors have triumphed in transforming their corporeality into an agency. Lenny's betrayal of Ayah is an active engagement in the changing human relationships and fates during riots. So is Gustad's withdrawal of the money from the account that Billimoria had trusted him with. The subjectivity of the protagonists is not limited to vulnerability, more so for being situated outside the religious dogma in being a Parsi - an already outcast with limited economic opportunities and shifting socio-cultural aspects. Lennard J Davis in the introduction argues on the agency of a disabled subject in changing the dominant national narrative :

"to push all the way through the sleeve of impairment to explore how disability subjectivities are not just characterised by socially imposed restrictions, but, in fact, productively create new forms of embodied knowledge and collective consciousness."(2)

The protagonists are not the "ideal body" type and hence do not fit as a perfect 'model'. Gustad and Lenny are unheroic, their characters are laden with non- Zeus and non-Aphroditic features, their demeanour is utterly human and imperfect- they are a victim of the changing relationships

of other religions and yet play greater roles as friends and sympathisers. Lenny describes her leg as "functional but it remains gratifyingly abnormal-and far from banal!".She later in the novel, describes Ayah's condition as "grotesque in the obviously straitened and abnormal circumstances of her life.". The prospect of a norm as in normality is a socially constructed curve where the majority of the population falls. And disabled or diseased are grouped with 'undesirable' traits. Dinshawji describes his normalcy as " As long as I do my nonsense,I am the normal Dinshawji." Gustad is afraid that "the more ill he becomes, the harder he will work to be the normal Dinshawji."(Chap.10) Hence, in a nation that dictates normal, nonsense is seen as able, superstitious rituals conducted by Dilnavaz is desirable, while the disease is considered unbearable. Dinshawji's death is considered as a purification from the diseased society. Such paradoxes in the novels create a space for resistance. Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidwa have carefully tweaked their narrative into creating a space for celebrating the abnormal in the backdrop of nation-building with sincere detailing and humourous interruptions. The novels are at once challenging central assumptions related to disability and death by going beyond their material allocation and embodiment into their functioning aspect of creativity and imagination. The authors have critically examined the controversial and upsetting abnormality through the characterization of disabled bodies and have criticised national bureaucratic and medical systems that have overlooked and sometimes excluded these people. Disability and death intermix with nationality, gender, and history of the citizens and create fluidity from conventional dominant constructs.

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