

**Celebrating the Space: A Subaltern Reading of Jyothsna Phanija's 'Taylor's Slate,' 'Venus has No Wings' and 'Photo-nystagmus.'****S. Krishna Kumar****PG student (English Literature)****Loyola College, Chennai****Abstract:**

*Not everyone looks at the world alike. While literature abounds with the perspectives of men and women, it does not have many representations from the bottom-most of the subalterns. This paper ushers in a new voice to the literary scene, a visually challenged poet by name Jyothsna Phanija, from Kaikalur, a remote hamlet in Andhra Pradesh. She has published her poems in many well-known national and international journals, while launching of her poetry collection in print is underway. The paper highlights the celebration of disability – especially visual impairment -- In three of her poems such as 'Taylor's Slate,' 'Venus Has No Wings,' and 'Photo-Nystagmous.' It also dissects the poems of their predominant themes, literary techniques and other linguistic features. In addition, the paper features an exclusive interview with the writer, throwing light on her poetic craft. As a whole, the paper establishes as how subalternity, in the form of disability, functions as an undercurrent beneath the fabric of her poetry.*

**Key words:** Jyothsna Phanija, Visually challenged poet, Disability, Celebration, Themes and techniques.

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Ranajit Guha uses the term subaltern “as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Subaltern Studies I no page). Though the definition does not explicitly include the disabled, they are subalterns as they are made physically and socially weak by their disability. In the history of literature, the disabled community does not have many representations; even when it had, it was viewed either in the light of sympathy, or rendered invisible. Such being the case, it requires someone from the very community to speak for and about it.

The paper ushers in a new voice to the literary scene by name Jyothsna Phanija, a visually challenged poet from Andhra Pradesh. It attempts to highlight the celebration of disability -- especially that of visual impairment -- in three of her poems such as ‘Taylor’s Slate,’ ‘Venus has no wings,’ and ‘Photo-nystagmus.’ It also dissects the poems of their predominant themes and provides an analysis of their diction and imagery. The paper, in addition, features an exclusive interview with the poet, intended to throw light on her creative world.

Jyothsna Phanija was born to B.V.S. Abhimanyakumar and B. Satyavathi at Kaikalur, a remote hamlet in Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh, on April 19, 1990. Born blind, she did her high school education at Andhra Blind Model High School and intermediate at Kaikalur Govt. Junior College. Graduating B.A. English Literature from Maris Stella College, Vijayawada, she went on to do her Masters at English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad. She has a doctorate from EFLU, and works as an assistant professor of English at ARSD College, University of Delhi.

Phanija published her first poem, ‘Painted Lyrics,’ in a US-based journal called Luva, A Journal for Creative Imagination. Ever since, she has published her poems in more than forty national and international journals, and to mention a few, Indus Woman Writing, American Diversity Report, The Malaysian Poetic Chronicles, Poetry Pacific, etc. besides, her poems have featured in anthologies such as Scaling Heights, I vs. Eye anthology, and Skeleton’s anthology. A collection of her poems in print form is forthcoming.

Space is not only physical, but also social. If the world as a social space is bifurcated into mainstream and marginal, the disabled community will take the bottom-most position. As this said, being in such a position, one can either choose to brood over the pain and suffering or celebrate whatever liminal space one occupies. For instance, writers such as Bama and Alice Walker celebrate their subaltern positions of being Dalit and African-American women in their works. In the same way, Jyothsna Phaniya celebrates her space in being a visually challenged person in her poems.

In 'Taylor's Slate,' Phaniya expresses a sense of novelty and wonder as initial feelings of learning Mathematics as a visually challenged child. Taylor's arithmetic frame is a frame with "star shaped holes with eight angles, thus allowing the double-ended metal types to be placed in different positions according to a set system" (Assistive Devices for the Visually Impaired 210). It is difficult for a visually challenged child to understand the instruments of empowerment such as "tiles," "aluminium frame," and "scaled trays," etc. (Phaniya Web). However, they also serve as materials of imaginative entertainment when she writes,

Wings in abundance, the penciled slate handed us (Phaniya Web).

In the normal system, each number and algebra sign has its own shape, thus it does not lead to any confusion. Whereas, manipulating all the numbers with one tile and algebra with another creates problems of understanding in the modified system. However, the poet does not fret over the difficulty and rather celebrates it with her lively imagination,

Sometimes, we built castles with those candles

The other times, flowers holding trees

Faces and birds, erasable igloos (Phaniya Web).

If 'Taylor's Slate' is a poem about including a visually challenged child into the mainstream world, 'Venus has no wings' is a self-reflection of a woman after having been included in it. The privilege of "inclusivity" has its own challenges as the broader the world becomes, the more the problems one faces. Stepping out into the world means to confront the harsh reality as expressed in the following line,

Away from home, life is a practical test (Phaniya Web).

Inclusivity does not guarantee everything. For instance, one has to fight for equality, besides enduring failures, identity crisis, exploitation, etc. in spite of all these conundrums, one can choose what one wants to be. One can find solace in doing what one likes the most, as Phaniya does with reading books,

She finds the fancy nowhere except in her books.

In tricky combinations (Phanija Web).

If early poems centered on empowerment and inclusivity, 'Photo-nystagmus' introduces the tangles related to love and relationship that a visually challenged woman faces. Nystagmus is defined in Oxford English Dictionary as "an involuntary oscillation of the eyeball" (620). With nystagmic eyes that "move in semi circles" (Phanija Web), it is possible neither to capture a picture of it nor teach painting to a person having such problem. While the persona in the poem tries to convince her lover of her inability to hold the brush, he thinks that he can include her in his world by making her participate in all his activities as in

But you were keen to teach me painting (Phanija Web).

This showcases the difficulty of making someone understand what one can and what one cannot without being misunderstood. Though these interpersonal struggles are inevitable, she accepts them as part of her existence and cherishes the time spent with her lover as she concludes,

You can hold my palms and copy the lines

For many other remunerative posters (Phanija Web).

The paper moves on to the thematic analysis of Phanija's poems. J. A. Cuddon defines Theme as a "Central idea which may be stated directly or indirectly" (A Dictionary of Literary Terms 695). A common theme found in all three of Phanija's poems is inclusion. In 'Taylor's Slate,' the process of inclusion is carried out with an educational method in the form of modified Mathematics. While 'Venus has no wings' reads inclusion as a "Fanciful word" (Phanija Web), 'Photo-nystagmus' treats inclusion as a fuel for the relationship to move forward in the following lines,

But you were keen to teach me painting (Phanija Web).

These poems underscore how important does the "moving world" consider inclusion (Phanija Web). However, the process of inclusion is mutual as it is equally inevitable for the disabled community to let to be included. It has difficulties both before and after the inclusion, citing which, it cannot avoid the process itself.

Ironically, inclusion results in alienation. Alienation is a derivative of the term alienate meaning "to make someone feel that they are different and do not belong to a group (Cambridge Learner's Dictionary 18). Though a visually challenged person is included in the mainstream, he/she cannot stop feeling "other," largely due to their "physical differences" (Phanija Web). One cannot leave one's body behind, and the presence of one's body makes one self-conscious of one's disability. Besides, inclusion threatens one's identity as demonstrated in 'Venus has no wings,'

Away from home she is someone else invisible to her (Phanija Web).

In 'Photo-nystagmus,' the poet projects a discord of interests between the lovers. The persona in the poem is demanded to engage herself in a concrete activity, while her mind wanders into the abstract, imaginary world. Though they are together as "steric insects" (Phanija Web), she is not particularly comfortable of being herself as in,

They burn out eyes in the lasik dust (Phanija Web).

Not always one feels alienated due to one's inferior position. Alienation comes also when one is ranked superior. A visually challenged person is said to possess extra-sensory abilities. The mainstream has stereotyped them as having exceptional memory and ability to remember voices, instead of treating them as normal human beings. The so-called super-human potential makes them feel alienated and frustrated as in,

To kill all the other senses, she cuts her fingers, refills with words.

To make her name spell properly, to erase several taglines, she lives in ice, making charcoal (Phanija Web).

Though alienation seems to be an ineluctable part of one's existence, one can certainly transcend it by lively imagination as in 'Taylor's Slate,' freedom and mobility as in 'Venus has no wings,' and skill of coping with one's strengths and weaknesses as in 'Photo-nystagmus.'

Having parsed the poems of their themes, the paper moves on to analyze their diction. M. H. Abrams defines diction as "The kinds of words, phrases, and sentence structures and sometimes also of figurative language that constitute any work of literature (A Glossary of Literary Terms 298). In terms of diction, Phanija is distinctly subaltern in a sense that the expressions she uses are related to the world of the visually challenged, that is, they are new to the mainstream. For instance, she employs such terms as "Taylor's slate," "aluminium frame," "tiles," "scaled trays" which are associated with the modified Mathematical pedagogy. Besides, she makes use of ophthalmological terms such as "nystagmus," "chiaroscuro pupils," "lasik dust," "photogenic iris," etc. analyzing the employment of such diction, Phanija's intention seems not to distance herself from the mainstream, but to teach it something of her world.

The result of a study published in the Journal of Neuroscience reads as follows: "People who are blind from birth are able to detect tactile information faster than people with normal vision (Blind people perceive touch faster than those with sight Web). This demonstrates the visually challenged people's use of tactual skill to connect to the rest of the world. As this said, Phanija's poems abound with tactile imagery. Imagery as a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra-sensory experience (Cuddon 322). Expressions such as "moved it in fingers," "we inserted fingers," "she erases," "hold the brush" illustrate a visually challenged person's high tactual sensitivity. The sense of touch starts from empowerment (learning Braille) to getting into a relationship,

You can hold my palms and copy the lines

For many other remunerative posters (Phanija Web).

The focal point of the research moves from the poems to their poet. Phanija showed interest in poetry from her childhood, largely due to her mother's reading of poems from the newspapers. Growing up, she was inspired to write poetry both in English and Telugu by Mr. Samson and Mr. Narayanakumar, her language teachers. After early rejections and fruitless attempts, she has published her poems in as many journals as she has tried, and has been awarded prizes for writing poetry in her mother tongue. Below is an extract from the interview conducted with the poet online:

How important a position does disability hold in your poetry?

It holds a significant position. I imagine the world; never think of the authenticity of the images. It's a privilege, as the images are unrefined. I get the vocabulary, themes of disability, I can write about something I personally experience. Though I keep my disability identity away from reader's view, it holds a major role in my view of defining the universe.

Why do you celebrate your subaltern position rather than to do otherwise, even when it is fraught with its own concerns?

To be away from the stereotypes. To give my own voice to the suffering. To be away from lamentation. To make myself happy from the sympathetic gazes of the others. To tell the world that I am not an unhappy soul.

When asked of her triple identities as a woman, a visually challenged person, and a poet, she responded that the backgrounds of her gender and disability get amalgamated to make a unified whole as poet. To a question on expressions based on experiences, she answered that since experiences vary from individual to individual, her experience of being a disabled need not be the same with another. Thus, it was always good to voice out one's individual experiences rather than expressing the collective.

Phanija feels that it is important for every disabled person to speak: "Everybody has a distinct voice. As disabled, we should speak. We should speak so that, we no longer would live in the descriptions of the non disabled world."

A subaltern reading of Jyothsna Phanija's poems establishes that she has a unique voice from the visually challenged community. It exemplifies that the subalternity can be celebrated in spite of its struggles and sufferings. It points out to the importance of inclusivity in the life of a visually challenged person. It also delegates the choice in the hands of an individual to suffer or accept things as part of one's existence.

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