

## The Emergence of Disability Life Writings in India as a Counter-Narrative

**Washim Sajjad**

Ph.D Scholar, Department of English  
HPU, Shimla.

### Abstract

People with disabilities are represented by the so-called ‘normal’ or ‘ableist’ perspectives throughout history. As a result, the common understanding of disability is highly misleading. However, in recent decades in India, people with disabilities have begun to represent their own voices and subjective experiences by engaging in various movements and activities. As a part of this, few individuals with disabilities have started writing about their experiences in the forms of life writings such as autobiographies, memoirs and auto-fictions. Hence, this research paper aims to explore how Indian disability life writings serve as a counter-narrative against the misconceptions of disability. It also seeks to examine how these writings expose the process of marginalization providing much-needed voice against the dominant cultural narratives of ableism.

**Keywords:** Disability, Ableism, Cultural Narrative, Life Writing, Counter Narrative

### Cultural Narratives of Disability

People with disabilities have been marginalised throughout history. They are constantly pushed into the fringe of society. This process of marginalization can be traced to the misrepresentations of people with disabilities in various cultural narratives. It contributes numerous negative interpretations and has been responded to throughout history as a social disgrace in a different mode: as “omens or prodigies, visitations of sin, freaks and curiosities,

as inducing mockery, embarrassment or compassion and as the subjects of disciplining, institutionalization or charitable provision” (Turner and Stagg 16). People with disabilities, thus, are identified as evil, weak, ill, helpless and a problem. They are rarely portrayed as a normal human being with individual agency. Because of their one disabled identity, they have been denied all other prospects of life. Our society doesn’t usually encourage individuals with disabilities to live normal lives. It is assumed that they are not capable of participating in various roles in life.

The social construction of stigmatise identity of disability has been created through the reproduction of various negative images and stereotypes based on cultural assumptions. Those negative images are already available in the dominant cultural narratives. But at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, those narratives took a new shape in which physical impairments have been labelled as a problem for society and therefore unfit for society. This shift was influenced by the emergence of medical advancements and eugenics (Adams et al 2015). In the present time, medical surveillance recognised people with disabilities as abnormal and unfit. The medical discourse, therefore, suggests that those problematic bodies should be cured or fixed and normalised through medical interventions (Thomson 2015). However, sometimes medical intervention is beneficial for disabled people but not all conditions of disabilities are curable. Thinkers of disability studies believe that disability is a social problem. Michael Oliver stated that “the problem arises when the doctors try to use their knowledge and skills to treat disability rather than illness. Disability is a long-term social state that is not treatable medically and certainly not curable” (Oliver 36). This medicalisation process tends to reduce the subjectivity and social functioning of people with disabilities. Thus, both the predominant cultural and medical discourse of disability rarely recognises individual agency and subjective experience of people with disabilities. Some

fundamental aspects related to education, employment, social engagement and sexual rights are usually denied to them. Instead, they are seen as helpless, incapable, unfit, problem and charitable property.

A similar trend of portraying disability as a stigma is also practised in traditional literature. Rosemarie Garland Thomson questions the tendency of depicting disability negatively in popular literature. While discussing the hegemonic control of dominant cultural texts, she asserts "the plot's or the work's rhetorical potential usually benefits from the disabled figure remaining other to the reader - identifiably human but resolutely different" (Thomson 11). Disability is primarily served as an instrument in the artistic repertoire which seeks to establish common people (able-bodied) as an appropriate subject. In *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000), David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder assert that fictional narrative is an inherently normative, and conservative form. It has the potential to directly inform an individual and society. Fictional narratives often embody the prejudice of society towards people with disability. They assert that "the very structure on which the novel rests tends to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character" (44). Hence, as a part of the norm, the motif of fictional narratives emphasizes the characteristic of a non-disabled character as universal quality, whereas, a disabled character remains either invisible or without any positive social roles. In a way, this process of portrayal subjugates as well as distorts the real subjective self of people with disabilities.

The understanding of the concept of disability has been evolving. Now, disability activists locate disability not inside the body but outside the body which they called social disability. Mike Oliver (1996), one the proponents of the 'social model of disability' argues that individual physical and mental limitation is physical impairment whereas disability is

something when an impaired body in interaction with society faces barriers. This categorization of disability brings out diverse scholarly interests in academic circles. Disability as a critical analysis has never been a part of history, literature, and philosophy until recently. Now it has been described as a product of social setting and cultural context. Recent academic scholars seek disability through an interdisciplinary approach, to “think about disability not as an isolated, individual medical pathology but instead as a key defining social category on a par with race, class, and gender” (M. Turner and Stagg 21). The social model of disability gets its prominence in Britain during the 1990s through disability activism called the *Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation*. The advent of the social model of disability has influenced many other fields of studies including social sciences and humanities. Disability thinkers such as Sharon L Snyder, David T Mitchell, Lenard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, and G. Thomas Couser help to situate disability in humanities and cultural study. Whereas in India Anita Ghai, Nandini Gosh and Shilpa Anand serve the same purpose.

### **Locating Disability in India**

Currently, a growing disability awareness can be witnessed globally. Similarly, In India disability awareness is also rising. Recently, the government of India has amended the 2016 disability act. This demonstrates growing institutional attention. However, this amendment has yet to implement on the practical ground for the actual improvements of individuals with disabilities and has not significantly altered the public's mindset about disability. Anita Ghai (2002), a well-known Indian scholar and activist in the field of disability, stated that: “notwithstanding the legislation, the State continues to be largely apathetic. Owing to a complete lack of public planning, responsiveness to any special

condition such as disability is missing. Consequently, the physical environment is largely inaccessible and inconvenient” (50). According to Anita Ghai, the reality of disability rights and awareness is largely lacking in India. At present, disability remains a struggle for survival, with issues such as education, employment, social integration, economic empowerment, and gender equality still in their early stages in the overall disability activism movement in India. The basic struggle for survival is still a major concern for disabled individuals in India, and this is often ignored by the privileged and urbanized section of the disability activist community (Ghai 2002). Therefore, the inquiry of disability in the academic discourse remains largely inappropriate to address the real-life challenges faced by disabled people and their struggle for survival.

Furthermore, people with disabilities in India face challenges in overcoming cultural stigmas and stereotypes associated with disability. In India, disability is often seen as a problem, a deficiency, or a flaw. This leads to negative attitudes and images of disability. Additionally, traditional beliefs in the law of karma can negatively impact people with disabilities, who are sometimes portrayed as suffering divine punishment for past misdeeds. A similar observation is stated by Anita Ghai. She asserts: “Disabled people sometimes are depicted as suffering the wrath of God and being punished for misdeeds that either they or their families have committed—a kind of penance or retribution for past misdeeds” (52).

Furthermore, a vast corpus of research found that the charity model remains prevalent in India. Disabled individuals often receive handouts of food, money, or clothing is very common in India. However, this approach does little to improve their quality of life or enable them to live independently. The focus on charity overlooks the need for fundamental changes

in societal attitudes and for the provision of resources that promote independence and empower disabled individuals (Ghai 2002).

### **Disability Life Writings as a Counter Narrative**

Based on the above discussion, it is observed that people with disability lack control over the representation of their own image and subjective voice. For centuries, people with disabilities are represented from the perspective of so-called 'normal' or ableist perspectives. Whereas, disabled individuals themselves have strongly felt the need to represent their own voices. As a part of this, for the past three decades, they have been participating in various social movements and activism. Though disability activism for civil rights is a recent development in India, have gained significant momentum in both academic and political discourse. Likewise, some disabled individuals in India begin to raise their voices through life writings such as in the forms of autobiographies, memoirs, and auto-fictions. Those disability life writings challenge the inadequate representation of disability-related issues in dominant cultural narratives and literature. They highlight how disabled individuals have been marginalized in society due to a dominant culture of ableism, and provide a much-needed voice from the disabled community.

Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* (2012) is one such disability life-writing deals with her journey in life. She is a visually impaired person. Her story of life does not only talk about her visual impairment but how she has experienced her disability in interaction with her surrounding. It deals with several issues of a disabled woman related to education, employment, love, relationship, marriage and motherhood. Generally, disabled women are not usually viewed as suitable for these avenues of life due to misconceptions about disability. As usual, Preeti encounters unsurmountable challenges in becoming suitable for a

job, a romantic partnership, and fulfilling the roles of an ideal wife and mother. But Preeti has successfully pursued all these roles resiliently despite difficulties.

While dealing with her life story she does not find herself as the problem but she finds an uncooperative society as the problem. At first, she is denied regular education by the school authority due to his blindness. Although, she has been highly interested in a romantic partner and marriage, frequently faced rejection in relationships and marriage. Eventually, when she got married, her first husband treated her so violently that made her feel completely helpless and led to divorce after having two children. Her drunkard and torturous first husband Keith delves her to realize the importance of economic independence for a free life. Eventually, she engages in several jobs as an aerobics trainer and as a saleswoman in a pickle manufacturing company to support her children and family. After a long period of a traumatic life, she successfully establishes herself as a professional and finally gets married for the second time to Aswin. With, her second husband and her two children together start living happily. Thus, Preeti's personal story does not show herself as helpless or unworthy but as a person with individual agency. Her bodily condition is not a problem for her but the way she has been treated in the surrounding. In a way, Preeti's personal story resists the misconceptions and cultural narratives of disability.

Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* (2011), is a groundbreaking disability life-writing, set in both Indian and London, and tells the incidents of her life with cerebral palsy. She has only one little finger that becomes her lifeline. She has an intelligent mind with a disobedient body and one obedient finger. She wrote this book by using her one little finger. Now she is a disability activist and professionally a freelancing event organizer at a bookstore. Malini finds her life under the medical care more of a patient than of a human. She is being refused

by various schools in India to give admission. She recounts this situation as the darkest period of her life (15). Because of her cerebral palsy, she is refused fundamental human rights and opportunities.

Malini Chib primarily talks about the issues of accessibility in India. She faces significant difficulty to manage her education in India due to the unaccommodating education system and inaccessible infrastructure. She complains about Indian Public infrastructures which actually reduce her social functions. She writes, “I have been upset while trying to enter the five-star hotel, art galleries, or park in India, to find that no thought has given to a person who cannot walk. Usually, all that is needed is ramp” (83). But during her stay in London, she found her physical disability is not as problematic as in India. consequently, she tried to show how her cerebral palsy is not a problem but an inaccessible surrounding. Along with this, she also questions the dominant misconception of society which assumed individuals with a disability as asexual. To counter this misconception, she writes, “As I grew older, I naturally desired sex and relationship. Like most women, sometimes I crave to be in the arms of a man. Most men look at me asexual” (146). In a way, recounting her experiences from different phases of her life she tries to hold a realistic depiction of disability in which she does find herself as a problem but the inaccessible environment and culture. She says “I know only me and I like me” (19).

*Trying to Grow* (2008) is auto-fictional life-writing. The author himself is the protagonist of the memoir with his real identity. The story is told from the first-person point of view. It revolves around the protagonist, and his family and friends. The protagonist is known by the name Brit in the memoir because of his brittle bone. It is a disease osteogenesis imperfecta characterized by fragile bone that breaks easily. He is a wheelchair user as the



lower part of his body is dysfunctional. The narrative of the memoir deals with various crucial aspects of life which are usually denied in the context of disabled people. Our society usually sees disability as a human tragedy and assumed unsuitable for any social role. Accordingly, it expects people with disability as someone who must be unhappy. But Firdaus Kanga portrayed Brit with happy and bold nature as academically superior and sexually perverted. All these characteristics are not usually expected of an individual with disability. Simultaneously, at outset of the story, Brit establishes himself as a writer and economically independent and starts living an autonomous life by remodelling his kitchen and employing a carer. In a way, *Trying to Grow*, counters the popular cultural narrative with a realistic depiction of disability.

*Falling and Standing: My Life as a Schizophrenist (2015)* is Life-writing by Reshma Valliapan recounts her memories of childhood and the development of her schizophrenia. This memoir has no particular beginning, middle or end. This life-writing has no systematic order of writing. The publisher has received the contents through email from the author intermittently for a period of time. All the emails were published collectively in a single book following the originality of email chronology. The distinctive style of composition of the book constructs alternative aesthetics. The structural importance of the memoir is identical to schizophrenic thought and emotion.

Schizophrenia is a residue of telling her story but, she does not limit her story here. Taking it beyond, she portrays her existence as being different with every possible link to society and culture. How her existence as a person with her passions, hobbies and lifestyle has always been disfavored and questioned. The recurring tone of the memoir voices against the insensitivity and sometimes cruel nature of society. Due to her play boyish nature and

passion for basketball, she is extremely despised by her parents. To get rid of her rebellious behaviour, once, her parents took her to a baba who declare her 'transvestite' and said "You are a boy caught in a girl's body that is why you dress like that and sit and talk the way you do" (15). Due to her different personality, she becomes the victim of social taboo and her parents too misunderstood her. She considers her parents as a demon and every time she wants to escape from them. With her life writing, Reshma wants to show how she is often misunderstood because of different personality type and that also trigger her mental condition.

In conclusion, it can be stated that life writing can challenge the historical misrepresentation of individuals with disabilities and empower them to take control of their own narrative. In a similar vein, G. Thomas Couser (2012) states that "disability memoir (life writing) should be seen, therefore, not as spontaneous self-expression but as a response—indeed a retort—to the traditional misrepresentation of disability" (7). He also believes that "life writing about disability: written from inside the experience in question, it involves self-representation by definition and thus offers an opportunity for personal reevaluation of that condition" (6). In a way, disability life writings initiate control over the narratives of disability and provide a scope for reconstructing the real image of disability. These narratives also advance a political agenda of civil rights by voicing for and voicing about people with disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

A concise examination of these disability life writings reveals how the personal identity of individuals with disabilities is depicted in these works, which have historically been marginalized within Indian culture. Although disability life writings in India are

emerging gradually, they encompass a range of issues related to people with disabilities such as accessibility, gender, sexuality, and most importantly their claim for individual agency. Thus, Disability life writing may provide a holistic understanding of disability. The subjective portrayal of disabled individuals in disability life writing interrogates the cultural narrative of disability which often compares disability to inability. It also challenges the narrative plot and discursive phenomenon of portraying disabled characters negatively. Consequently, disability life writings expose cultural stigma and stereotypes of disability by interrogating the discourse of abjectness associated with it.

### **Work Citation**

Adams, Rachel, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin. *Keywords For Disability Studies*. 1st ed. New York and London: New York University Press, 2015.

Couser, G. Thomas. *Signifying Bodies*. 1st ed., University of Michigan Press, 2009.

Chib, Malini. *One Little Finger*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2011.

Ghai, Anita. "Disabled Women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism." *Hypatia*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2002, pp. 49–66., doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2002.tb00941.x.

Kanga, Firdaus. *Trying to Frow*. New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 2008.

Monga, Preeti. *The Other Senses*. New Delhi: Roli Books, 2012.

Turner, David M., and Kevin Stagg. *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity: Bodies, Images and Experiences*. Routledge, 2006.

Oliver, Michael. *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*. 1st ed., Macmillan Education, 1996.

Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. *Extraordinary Bodies*. 1st ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

--- "Eugenics." *Keywords For Disability Studies*, edited by Rachel Adams, et al., 1st ed., New York University Press, 2015.

Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). 1975, *Fundamental Principles*, Available at <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/UPIAS-fundamental-principles.pdf>

Valliappan, Reshma. *Fallen, Standing: My Life as a Schizophrenist*. New Delhi, Women Unlimited, 2015.