

Representation of Disability in Pramila Balasundaram's *Sunny's Story*

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Abstract

People with physical and intellectual disability have been objectified and stigmatised for being misfit. Critical Disability studies dismantles the normative human construct and rejects the categorization of 'normal' human and 'other.' This field of study emphasizes on the social model of disability rather than the medical one. Pramila Balasundaram's *Sunny's Story* captures the journey of eponymous character who is intellectually disabled and is in a quest for belongingness. The aim of this paper is to show how social environment plays a major role in the development of Sunny's identity. Through the representation of disability in literature readers become familiar with its complexities. Social inclusion and acceptance become pertinent tools in raising awareness about disability. The author deviates from representing stereotypical character in this work.

Keywords: Intellectual disability, stigmatised, objectified, belongingness, acceptance, social environment, inclusion.

Introduction

People with disability have been viewed as inhuman, sub-human deprived of agency. Disability studies examines how cultural, sociological, and political forces intertwine to limit access to equal opportunities. This worldview encourages considering disability as a societal issue rather than a medical one. Disability rights movement is closely related to the women's movements and Dalit's movements. The civil rights movement, anti-racist protest accelerated during World War II. As a result of change in the political and ideological forces, a paradigm shift took place in the development of theories and new approaches were formed to understand the shifting dynamics of social reality. The definition of disability emphasized on the social model rather than viewing it as a medical construction. In the 1990s disability rights movement arose in India when people with disabilities from various backgrounds such as race and class divisions started sharing collective ideas.

In India and much of south Asia, disability is largely seen as a product of cultural impediments such as beliefs and stereotypes as well as structural impediments like poverty, lack of development, illiteracy, unemployment and caste, class and gender barriers. People with disability are marginalised in education, employment, mobility and other significant life areas. The meaning of disability in India is embedded in this basic struggle for survival and cultural understanding. (Mehrotra 66)

People with some form of deformity have been discriminated and segregated as evil, mutants and Other to the normal human. In historical time, people perceived disability as related to one's karma or actions. This view is linked to the Hindu karmic idea that a person would keep reincarnating after death until they have found salvation. For example, blindness was believed to be a punishment of the misdeeds that were committed in the past life. Shakuni with limping leg from Mahabharata and hunch backed Manthara from Ramayana portray negative stereotypical characters in Indian Mythology. Even William Shakespeare portrayed

king Richard III as a hunchbacked villain reflecting the negative idea. Other characters such as Ahab with prosthetic leg from *Moby Dick*, cognitively disabled character Lennie Small from *Of Mice and Men* are described as menace. Prior to 1990s people with intellectual disability were not a part of disability rights movement. Later the introduction of the National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999 enabled their participation with equal opportunities.

People develop their understanding of developmental disability through the representation in media and literature. Anupama Iyer in her article "Depiction of intellectual disability in fiction" deliberates about the impact of fictional images on the reader:

...authors rely on triggering a shared understanding between themselves and the reader. For intellectual disability, this shared understanding depends on what is culturally accepted about the condition as well as what is medically known. Thus, literary depictions, unlike medical descriptions, do not have to be accurate or theory driven. (127)

M. Miles in the article "Community and Individual Responses to Disablement in South Asian Histories: Old Traditions, New Myths?" discusses that the most reactions towards disabled South Asians as children, adult or elderly have occurred inside the family. So, in his opinion it is important to document these observations as we rarely find these records.

Intellectual Disability in *Sunny's Story*

Sunny's Story by Pramila Balasundaram focuses on the eponymous protagonist, Sunny, affected by Down's Syndrome providing a nuanced portrayal of the psychological and social challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. It contains factual details of the event that occurred with one of the family's son, Ranjan Kaul also known as Sunny who disappeared in January 1992. In this coming-of-age work, Sunny's character is developed with sensitivity, highlighting both his vulnerabilities and strengths.

Pramila Balasundaram is the founder and director of an NGO Samadhan. She currently serves as the Vice President of the Asian Federation for the Intellectually Disabled (AFID) and has a master's degree in English. She has also been actively advocating for women's empowerment, for which Uttar Pradesh Mahila Manch granted her the "Hindi Prabha 2011" award.

Down Syndrome is one of the most common genetic disorders that affects children born with an extra chromosome or an extra piece of chromosome. According to a report approximately, 1 in 800 children are born with this condition annually in India. Children affected by the condition are typically slower to speak than others and usually have an IQ (a measure of intelligence) in the mildly to moderately low range. This chromosomal defect is characterized by intellectual disability. (RBSK 89) In addition, it is critical that individuals with Down Syndrome perceive themselves more than just their impairment.

The story is written in a non-linear narrative. It details Sunny's journey of identity and belonging through three episodes- New Delhi, Jullundur, Kolkata respectively. It also emphasizes the role of family in supporting an individual with Down Syndrome. The story begins in Sunny's absence and his natural cheerful side is revealed by Kamal's potent imagination. The story opens with the panic-stricken husband and wife, Kamal and Prem

who have been waiting for their twenty-two years old son to return home. Initially they do not see it as a serious cause of worry as “they had gone through this ritual before”(Balasundaram 3) only to realize later that their son has been kidnapped. We come to know of Sunny’s identity mostly through his mother, Kamal’s memory and image. Through a flashback the readers are informed that as a parent with no prior experience, Kamal had been unable to derive something serious from the physical symptoms, which included “slanting eyes” and “stumpy fingers” until the doctor diagnosed. Two years after his birth in 1970, in addition to his diagnosis Kamal and Prem had to deal with ambiguity and precarious position this revelation posed. “The rain” and “Greyness” (4) in Dr. Raut’s clinic reflects Kamal’s unsettling emotions before reality weighs down upon her. Once the diagnosis of her son being intellectually disabled is confirmed Dr. Raut gathers courage and breaks the news to her who was also an old friend.

Socio- cultural Analysis

Kamal is unable to come to terms to this news and her legs and back become numb. Her emotional upheaval becomes especially evident when she thinks that something terrible has happened of which she is vaguely aware “refusing to acknowledge with her conscious mind what her unconscious had understood and known all along.” (9) Her cultural reluctance to acknowledge Down Syndrome as normal alteration from human exacerbates the medical diagnosis. She takes a long time to regain her composure. She lacks the necessary information and language to come into terms with her emotional ease. She recalls her elder son Ajay’s initial walk when he was nine- months old but there lies a contrast in Sunny’s condition who “has been weak from birth” (8) Society tends to impose guidelines on what is appropriate. An activist and critic Paul Hunt argued that society focuses on “difference” from a normal body. He puts it, “The disabled person's 'strangeness' can manifest and symbolize all differences between human beings.”(10) However, we see that Sunny’s family is portrayed as loving and dedicated, striving to understand and cater to his needs while navigating their own emotional and practical challenges.

Sunny grew fond of NAIDUS, a restaurant and favourite place for students to hang out and became a regular customer. In contrast to his “Special School” Sunny found happiness at this restaurant as he got a chance to be recognized by other people. The repetitive activities at school did not excite him. He longed to perform outdoor activities such as watering the plants in the school garden and “He wanted to be like the others he saw around him, chatting and laughing. Part of a group”(16) Sunny’s “dignity” had caught the attention of Naidu, the owner. He develops a sense of sensitivity and empathy towards Sunny providing extra care. He comes to realize that he or his children may have been just like Sunny. Taking advantage of Sunny’s innocence Rattan and Bhima who pretend to be his friends make some evil plans but Sunny lacks the capacity to judge the situation. He is rather happy because he thinks he belongs to someone. He agrees to go with them because “He felt immensely pleased... ,it was just the sheer satisfaction of being needed by another human being.”(29) It points out to person’s need for friendship and companionship. Sunny remembers his family, especially his mother, when Rattan and Bhima leave him on the streets after their burglary.

Indian literary critic and academician, Pramod K. Nayar highlights how social environment plays its role in defining disability. He explains that disability is not only a result

of bodily imperfections “but is the result of an interaction with an environment that prevents it (the body) from engaging in a full range of tasks and actions.” (103) The author gives a detailed account of Sunny’s new social life. Once he reaches Jullundur people gather around him staring at him and laughing which arouses “a vague sense of fear.” (Balasundaram 43) They call him with insensitive remarks “*budhu*”, “dumb.” (43) Initially Chote Ram, the station master finds him “funny”(44) but as time passes even the station master is filled with compassion towards him. He thinks “There was something in this boy which made you want to reach out to him.” (44) Sunny spends some time on the platform and the New Delhi episode ends when Sunny hungrily eats the lunch offered by Chote Ram. The author mentions Sunny’s blunt look and “stubby fingers” had made him look “oriental”(55) It hints at the term “mongolism” (a racial term) which was used by John Langdon Haydon Down for the first time and it hints at the similar facial characteristics that people with Down Syndrome possess such as “almond eye”.

After realizing their son’s kidnap Prem and Kamal start enquiring Sunny’s friends but it comes to no avail. So they conclude “He was lost and could not find his way home. Delhi was a big city and it could happen to anyone.” They decide to go to the police station and lodge a complaint the next morning. There, she glimpses a chart that displays the numbers of crimes that have been occurring in the city. The figures appear to be frightening and NS specifically grabs her attention. Constable Daya Ram explains that NS is Night Shelter set up by the government. He gives a ghastly picture of the place. The description agonizes Kamal. “Visions of Sunny in this horror film kept popping up in her mind.” She is close to tears as she imagines Sunny “sleeping on the floor with no covering. Sunny made to join a group of drunks and being forced to drink.” At the same time it also fills her up with some hope. Sunny had a special charm about him. People were fond of him.

His happiness was infectious. His laughter, often at the silliest of things, and above all his penchant for making friends made him very popular in school. His greatest need and his greatest gift was making friends. He would go anywhere he was welcomed and treated with some kindness. (56)

In line with scholarship on critical disability studies the author places Sunny's struggles in a variety of social circumstances, some hospitable and inclusive and others hostile. His mother, Kamal understood Sunny’s longing for company, for friends, for independence so she would encourage him to meet his friends. She had also understood Sunny’s obsession with trains. The smoke and noise of train had caused a sense of sheer excitement in Sunny. It was magical for him. Chote Ram thought of Sunny as someone very special. He believed that Sunny was protected by God. He had put an advertisement of Sunny in the local newspapers. Bu there was no response so Sunny continued to live with other children on this platform. “He became part of the platform culture” He had learnt to accept “ego less existence” He rarely thought about home and his memories of life in Delhi started to fade because he felt that he belonged there. He soon became centre of attraction amongst his friends. He thought he belonged there with his friends. One day his friend, Bintu and Sunny decide to go to the streets. He remembers the music system he had at home after coming across electronic shops. Somehow Sunny took the wrong direction and Bintu was out of sight. He finds a place to rest which was the compound of an old church. Father Paul, Pastor in charge of the Methodist Mission Church in the old part of Jullundur town. Sunny had agreed to polish the brass without any hesitation. He began his new life there and Rev. Paul thought that he had miraculously found Sunny. Rev. Paul decide to trace his parents seriously by advertising in

the English language newspapers. Not receiving any reply he thinks that it was God's will that he should be Sunny's sole guardian.

In the third episode "Kolkata" we see that Chaturlal, a respected businessman returns from his Europe trip and finds Sunny sleeping under the staircase of his house. It causes a stirring in his heart. Sunny reminds Chaturlal of his friend who was affectionately called *Anandi* or "innocent." (124) While in his sleep, Sunny throws his arm over his head and the inscription on the boy's arm grabs Chaturlal's attention. It specified his name was Ranjan Kaul and stated his address. Sunny spends his life on the station platform and is found after a year "hale and hearty looking as if he had been looked after and cared for and had never felt a twinge of fear or want."(82)

A significant theme in the book is the importance of social inclusion and acceptance. The narrative highlights the barriers Sunny faces in being accepted by his peers and the broader community, as well as the efforts made to create a more inclusive environment. Works like *Sunny's Story* aims to reveal and shape narratives of people with Down syndrome as nondisabled people viewing them as real people rather than as unusual and uncategorizable. It also stresses the importance of early intervention, inclusive education, and the need for a supportive community.

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