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(Re)Presentations of Disability Experiences : Reading De-metaphorization and Lived Realities in Two Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper reads the contested representations of disability with reference to two short stories- Anne Finger's "The Blind Marksman" and Mamang Dai's "The Silence of Adela and Kepi." Finger's story follows a blind marksman whose lived experience resists metaphorical and monolithic perspective of blindness, while Dai's narrative foregrounds the social and familial responses to autism in a rural community. By reading these texts together, I study how both works betray and destabilize stereotypical representations and unveil the complex realities of persons with disabilities.

Keywords: Anne Finger, Mamang Dai, The Blind Marksman, The Silence of Adela Kepi, Disability.

I. The Blind Marksman: De-Metaphorizing Blindness

"The blindness in this story isn't a metaphor."

—Anne Finger, 'The Blind Marksman'

From the ancient Greco-Roman epics to Indian mythology, the deception of blindness has often been a problematic one. The blind characters are either deployed as objects of pity and valour, or as narrative devices for plot development and symbolism. Against these objectivised and

objectified deployments of persons with blindness, both Ann Finger and the narrator of The Blind Marksman—which would be apt to consider as two distinct yet synergic voices—set out to demystify and re-present such presentations.

The first line itself serves as both a caution and invitation: caution that this narrative would not offer the 'objectified' vision of blindness, and therefore consequently an invitation to the readers to not merely 'look', but rather 'view', the blind as 'subjects' with their respective experiences and navigations with the surroundings. The story employs a meta-narrative method as the narrator pauses to address the readers directly. Right at the outset of the story we are made conscious of the manner in which we visualize the story of a person who is visually impaired. The narrator twice juxtaposes the Blind Marksman to the material objects in the reader's (supposed) surroundings—"[Y]ou think of the marksman's blindness and the sofa and the subway strap"(123). This deliberate collocation forces the reader to (re)consider how blindness as a condition is ripped off its affective qualities and rendered almost as material as other objects as the sofa, both in the social treatment of these people as well in their portrayals in cinemascape and literary spaces. It is almost as though there is no fundamental difference in the use of these three 'objects'—they are used as per pleasure and convenience of able-bodied people.

This de-metaphorization, if one were to call it, of the popular blind-man trope, takes on multiple layers in the story. The description of the spaces around him are appropriated to that of a visually impaired man's perception of his space. This is done by focusing not on the colours but primarily on other senses such as smell and touch. "For the blind marksman dawn isn't rosy-fingered; dawn is the sound of water rumbling and gushing and whistling through the pipes above and below him"(118). The reader is taken to the Marksman's place—a space ostracized

from the mainstream, geographically, culturally and socially. The "battered mountains" he inhabits and the menial job they are assigned, testifies to the apathetic treatment that people with disabilities received during this time. The narrative further becomes dense when intersectional concerns of class and imperialism are steeped in. "In the glorious new world shoes were to be repaired as part of a state enterprise, and the blind were to be the employees of this enterprise." Here again, the author attempts to unsettle the readers over how the blind person is being treated as political-device to meet its ends (very much like he is employed as a literary device—the metaphor for effect). Often the 'affect' of and on the disabled subject is given away to the effect that one desires to create; in this case an image of a socialist utopia—a glorious new world, that the politicians wish to portray.

The story manages to debunk the mental image of the weak-immobile-unaware blind person wedged in our memories. The narrator gives a detailed description of how the blind man becomes an accomplished marksman, and never misses a shot. “It is not as hard to be a blind Marksman as many sighted people would imagine.” After fighting in the War of National Liberation, he is felicitated with a medal. For being a blind crack shot, he is valorised and given a heroic, rather supernatural characterization by “The Great Leader” so much so that it amplifies to become a constant topic of gossip and ridicule amongst the people.

The leader goes on to say that the “blind marksman could hit moving targets at a range of half a mile and that the blind marksman had trained himself to smell an airplane in the sky long before it could be heard.” A normal gunman’s skill when acquired by a person with blindness is instantly deemed as paranormal, and fantastical. But the narrator does not stop here; not only are we shown the prejudiced actions of the ableist people but there are also descriptions of the marksman’s reaction to these ridicules. His human emotional response to their dehumanizing

demeanour is asserted at various instances in the story. “I am here,” the blind marksman said, stretching out his hands for the arms of the women. … He tried to explain to them … , but they only laughed harder. The blind marksman shouted, “What is so funny?” and then he felt a hand from behind shoving him down to the ground”(127). Finger attempts to offer us an intimate glimpse of the struggles both societal and emotional, that persons with disabilities grapple with. Through quite a cynical irony, the people hold Blind Marksman’s hyperbolic humorous figure at the center of their conversations and yet completely choose to ignore and disacknowledge his physical presence in the social spaces. This denying of existence and identity to the person with blindness draws one to think back about the tarnished imagination of disabled subjects, as objects of disdain and entertainment.

In the falling action of the short story, the imperial power enters as Santa on the Sledge and the Marksman for his countenance as a blind person is mistaken for a beggar by a foreign photographer. In the popular imagination, association of blindness and of disability broadly with poverty (albeit a historical faction) reinforces their symbolization as the helpless and the underdogs. The narrator deals with this description very carefully, where the marksman makes a final bold attempt to assert his autonomy and identity. He denies permission to be pictured but the photographer heedlessly continues capturing him, at which he says, “I repair shoes! I am not a beggar! My name is Memal Keshu. I am the blind Marksman”(132). This is for the first time that the titular blind marksman is named, whereby he puts in identity as person first, followed by the demarcation of his disability. It is at this point that Finger maintains the authenticity of the tone and implied purpose of the story: instead of turning it into a triumph-narrative where the marksman succeeds in overturning all the forces against him, the photographer is still shown to be filming him and imagines calls him a “blind beggar” in the caption, as though the person was

but an entity for his photojournalistic coverage.

Finger appears to engender a liminal space between victimizing and celebrating blindness and the blind, offering a faithful portrayal of disability experiences. To draw an inference, the short story, by the very act of critiquing the dehumanization and metaphorization of persons with blindness, is able to reclaim their experience and therefore succeed—if not in actual but the textual space—in re-humanizing and de-metaphorizing the subjects.

II. Disability in the Global South: Intersectionalities and Lived Experience

When read within Global Southern milieu, disability is subjected to a mar. First, disability as a category is socially ostracized. Basic human rights and institutional facilities still remain largely inaccessible to persons with disability, despite those being granted to them on paper and in jurisprudences Given the overbearing influence that the Global North has over the South, vis-à-vis disability scholarship and theorization, voices and perspectives from the other end remain largely untraversed.

There is a persistent lacuna pertaining to the articulation of South Asian epistemological frameworks of disability that stems from the categorical divisions. In his essay titled "Critical Disability Studies at the Edge of Global Development", Xuan Thuy Nguyen borrows from Anita Ghai to expound the problematic binarization such as the normal and abnormal, abled and the disabled, colonized and the colonizer whereby we inevitably relapse into the conformation of knowledge systems engendered by the North. This leads to silencing of the affective and experiential nuances which the South was denied space for, since ages. Therefore it becomes imperative to entrench deeper and problematize the 'us vs them' binary, which consequently calls for a rethinking and reassertion of frameworks—not just of disability studies but of other

disciplines to which it is inextricably linked. It is essential to understand that disability cannot be studied in isolation but operates at the interface of broader discourses: politics, gender, sociology, anthropology and others. Through the term “critical disability studies” Nguyen advocates for a critical (re)engagement with disability studies by strongly situating it in the cultural, political and postcolonial nexus. This imperative is corroborated in indigenous socio-cultural institutions such as medicinal practices and religion which heavily inform the understanding of disability. Indian culture abounds in mytho-religious theories and their heavy impressions on the notion and practices pertaining to disabilities, ailments and deformities are quite evident. This ethos is vividly captured in Nissim Ezekiel’s poem "Night of the Scorpion," where the narrator’s mother, stung by a scorpion, every person in the village—rooted in their rural superstitions—offers peculiar ways of care-giving and cure-seeking.

The peasants came like swarms of flies
And buzzed the name of God a hundred times
To paralyse the Evil One.
May the sins of your previous birth
Be burned away tonight, they said.
May your suffering decrease.

Such notions about suffering stemming from either the karma or retribution of sins from previous birth, or as a consequence of being possessed by an evil spirit, are pervasive thematic concerns in Southern literature and art. In “The Silence of Adela and Kepi”—a chapter from Mamang Dai’s work Legends of Pensam—the eponymous Kepi is a child with autism whose parents and relatives respond in a similar manner when he is hospitalized. His father, Togum, seeks aid from all the shamans nearby. Their relatives advise them to conduct various rituals, one

of which is performed "in case it was the spirit of a snake that had coiled around the body of their son" (Dai 2). Dai's story deliberates simultaneously about the life of Adela, another child with autism.

When they learn about her "mysterious condition of autism" (2), their initial reaction is of utter shock which stems from their naïve rationale that there has been no family history of "asthma" or "autoimmune disorder" in their generations. Such attributions of disability to ancestry and lineage too is a largely indigenous social dogma.

Adela's mother Mona, is irrationally held accountable for her disability. The co-ordinates of the care-giving dynamic get tilted significantly, which is rooted in gender performative—drawing from Judith Butler's term—that dictates the Southern social systems. The onus of caring and nurturing lies upon the women id est the mother figure. She is charged, rather thrust with the responsibilities of providing care and accused for any ramifications that ensue from 'neglect'. In the story in question Mona is, in a passive aggressive demeanour, blamed by her husband Jules, who throughout remains absent, using work and travel as pretexts to absolve himself of his parental responsibility towards the child. This gets further complicated when their race and ethnicities are taken into cognizance: Jules is a French man and Mona is a woman of Arab-Greek origin. Jules' dominance of Mona can also be read as a manifestation of historical power imbalance between the orient and the occident. This tension also causes her to internalize her subaltern position as a victim of colonial and patriarchal dogmas which have cast their shadows over the Global South. Critical examinations of disability and caregiving hence becomes instrumental in that it interrogates the construction of the 'normative' and 'norm' for not the care-seeker but also for the care-giver.

Navneet Sethi, from the perspective of a person with congenital COPD (Chronic Obstructive

Pulmonary Disorder), examines the intersections of two fundamental categories of caregiving: care offered by family which is unlaced by economic negotiations, and the paid obligations of caring and attending to the persons with disability by nurses and caretakers. Mona's emotional torment comes forth as a potential answer to the question that Sethi poses: "Does the presence of control politics in the realm of 'care' experience reveal the politics of the 'care' sector as well?" (6). If we seek to extrapolate and alter the story as readers, imagining that, what if Adela continues to live on, will her mother be able to provide the 'unconditional' care and affection? Perhaps not; for the act of providing care would be discounted by Mona's own strained relationship with her husband. Amidst these contestations, the caregiving practice is imbued with an amalgamation of concord and conflict. Sethi holds that a very similar interplay of harmony and discord can be observed in paid relationships with care providers such as nurses. She argues, for example, that a nurse's altering a patient's routine without informing the parents is an act of subordination and exerting control. In the case of Kepi for instance, his caretaker does 'care' to inform the parents that she had slipped on the way which caused him to have a bruise on his right arm. This hiding of information hints at neglect and condescending tendency towards the care-seeking subject.

Disability studies demands revaluation and reclamation of the rights of persons with disability, and of several other elements such as caregiving, autoethnography and life-writing. These revisions ought to not just be articulated but necessarily performative, be it through broader attempts to including spaces for disability analytics in academic spaces such as conferences on intersectional arenas as criticism, theory, world literature et al, or be it through an act—seemingly small yet significant—of putting the person-identity first by writing "persons with disabilities" instead of "disabled" as much as one can.

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