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An Appraisal of Disability and Gender Troubles in Dharamvir Bharti's *Gulki Banno*¹

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Abstract:

As the latest player within cultural studies, disability studies does not treat disability as just a matter of bodily deviance, deficiency or a medical condition. Within humanities, this emerging area of study considers disability as socially-culturally produced disadvantaged experiences suffered by person/s with a variance in mind or body. Disabled people's experiences intersect with that of caste, race, gender class, age and ethnicity. This paper is a reading of Dharamvir Bharti's short story *GulkiBanno* from the lens of gender and disability. Bharti's text exposes the oppressive cultural frames and conditions trapping the central female character, GulkiBanno. The author calls for action and initiative to transform and re-signify debilitating gender and disability norms, beliefs and perceptions widespread in society.

Keywords: disability, disability studies, gender, feminist analysis, normalcy, aesthetic-nervousness, and critical thinking.

“[D]isabled women suffer more than disabled men from the demand that people have “ideal” bodies, because in patriarchal culture people judge women more by their bodies than they do men” (Wendell 1989:114).

Disability: A Literary-Cultural Analysis

Disability is not a stable entity, nor a settled identity category. It is a multifaceted concept encompassing a varied range of meanings and experiences. The term's semantic and semiotic contours keep changing owing to its diverse historical contexts and locations. In popular terms, disability is understood as a personal tragedy/crisis and a medical condition. It is construed as



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some kind of bodily deformity, disfigurement or a wrecked mental condition that results in limiting the capacities and abilities of the affected person. Rapidly growing ‘disability studies’, however, shift the locus of disability analysis from the individual body to the oppressive effects produced by societal structures comprising race, religion, region, language, caste, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so on.

Disability, a term that has heretofore been so clear-cut to the public, is becoming increasingly polymorphous in the light of a new politics and scholarship. It can suggest a set of practices, kinds of embodiment, interactions with the built environment, an almost limitless array of literary types, frames of mind and forms of relationships. Gone are the days of a simple and dominant physiological or medical definition of disability. Instead, people have come to see an art of disability--poetry, music, song, literature--and a politics of disability that has accomplished path-breaking legislation and effected social change. (Smith 2004:1)

Disability study has revolutionized the very concept of disability and treats it more as a matter of ‘social experience’ rather than something that simply marks a deviance in the bodily norms or forms.

Disability studies has seen a paradigm shift; from disability as personal predicament to disability as social pathology. If we locate disability in the person, then we maintain a disabling status quo. In contrast, by viewing disability as a cultural and political phenomenon, we ask serious questions about the social world. Undoubtedly, societies subject people with impairments to discrimination. Disabled people have been hated, made exotic, pitied, patronized and ignored. Disability also evokes admiration, curiosity, fascination and sympathy. Disability studies respond to these acts of political and cultural life (Goodley 2011: XI).

A person with some defect in one’s body may be in a painful condition; however, when the same person comes to participate in social relations, things become much more stinging and nastier. To explore what goes into constituting disability, one must understand social and cultural



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“normalcy”² operating in people’s mind and society. Any kind of physical or intellectual deviation/impairment disturbs people’s perceptions of wellness and arouses discomfoting emotional states called “aesthetic nervousness”³. Disability and normalcy operate inseparably. Disability, to a great extent, is taken to be an effect of negatively constructed cultural perceptions that go into shaping and regulating the views and judgements of people about bodily impairments and anomalies. Such populist and sociallyover determined norms are oppressive in character, eliciting hierarchy and discrimination against the differently abled people. These socio-cultural standards not only breed discontents among the persons with disabilities, affect their self-esteem and efficiency but also mar the functioning of the family and community life and damage social harmony/relations. In pre-modern societies/world-views physical or mental impairment is projected as the divinely ordained punishment meted out to the disabled persons for their sinful deeds done in the current or previous life. And the modern-urban-industrial setups--increasingly driven by instrumental rationality, promoting speed and efficiency, and obsessed with standardized/trendy sightlines, fitness, fashion and beauty—find it quite knotty to accommodate peoples with deviant bodies, and thus promoting a varied range of ideologies and practices fostering discriminations and exclusions. Bodily differences are metamorphosed into cultural images, configurations and schemas that nurture an array of discriminatory-oppressive outlooks and practices. And thus, “many aspects of modernity are founded upon unequal valuation of some bodies over others” (Davidson 2008:171).

As an act of linguistic representation, literary-cultural artefacts extend and deepen our understanding of disability. The texts delving deep into the issues pertaining to disabilities draw attention towards hegemonic ideologies that tend to reinforce discriminatory and objectifying cultural attitudes and stigmatizing gaze towards the disabled. Harping on the major and/or minor disabled character/s in a text, literary artists are capable of taking their readers through intense and enriching experiences, loaded with the potential of eliciting empathy, emancipation, and social change. Disabled figures pervasive in literary texts offer a kind of “narrative prosthesis”⁴ for the textual coherence and completeness. For instance, what would be the fate of such literary



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classics as *The King Oedipus* and *King Lear*, if these masterpieces were rendered bereft of the motifs of blindness and madness, respectively?

Disability-Gender Intertwine

Gender--socially assigned meanings based on the sexual differences--is a key marker of people's identities. History is a witness to the fact that men and women have not been treated at par in terms of sharing privileges, power and positions. Hierarchical allocation of meanings—that places men at a higher pedestal-- is taken to be the root cause of women's distress and sufferings in society. A famous remark made by Simon de Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (2010: 283), explicates that woman is defined in terms of deficiency, lack, and projected as the 'other' of man. Man is norm; woman a deviation. At times the ruling gendered cultural configurations and ideologies construct women as inferior, incompetent, deficient and "misbegotten men" (Nancy Tuana qtd. in Garland-Thomson, 18). Women are portrayed as congenitally deformed by chauvinist ideologies and practices. Woman's identity including her body and psyche is often pathologized and stigmatized (treating women as passive, sick, feeble-minded, mad, irrational, and hysterical). Such devaluing sexist ascriptions to women lead to their subjugation, exploitation and control by men. Production and circulation of such regressive and distorted cultural discourses about women may turn them into vulnerable beings and may also hamper their self-formation. Undoubtedly, gender twisted cultural scripts internalized by women damage their self-perceptions, knowledge of their real selves and their efficiency/agency.

Disability is not gender neutral, as the epigraph given above suggests. Parallels are forged between the cultural assumptions about women's bodies and the bodies of persons with disabilities. Even the able-bodied women are construed as "mutilated males, improper form" (qtd. in Garland-Thomson, 18) by such a formidable thinker and critic, Aristotle. Iris Marion Young remarks: "Women in a sexist society are physically handicapped" (1990:153). Discriminatory and exclusionary gender norms internalized by women disable them gravely. As



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the naturalization of negatively constructed gender roles functions to validate injustices against women, so is the case with the culturally produced and regulated discourses of disability, whose operations forge the marginalization and exclusion of the persons with physical or cognitive imperfections. Gender troubles are conflated with disability oppressions.

Disability scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson have said that the fit between disability studies and gender studies is a good one. Issues of the body, social and cultural hierarchy, identity, discrimination and inequality, representation, and political activism have been central to both fields. The cultural meanings of disability, like the cultural meanings of gender, produce human actors, who act out all the rules and themes of disability and likewise the rules of gender. Simultaneously, the lived social environment of work, politics, and sociability may be hostile to the disabled as it may be to women. (Smith 2004:2)

Gender predicaments coupled with that of disability render women wretched and precarious. The crippling effects of the mainstream gender and disability discourses will further stand illuminated from an analysis of the chosen text *GulkiBanno*. *GulkiBanno* is a moving short story of a disabled woman by a celebrated Hindi poet, novelist, playwright, translator and social thinker, Dharamvir Bharti (1926-1997). The writer through the story—that highlights the miserable experiences of oppression produced and promoted by the unjust socio-cultural structures of gender and disability coming together—seeks his readers to think and act as citizens for social transformations by dispelling the rampant conservative, oppressive values and beliefs internalized by people that land them in pitiable conditions. Selected from the huge corpus of compelling narratives produced by Dharamvir Bharti including *Andhayug*, *GunahonkaDevta* and *SurajkaSatwanGhoda*, *GulkiBanno* champions the cause of the oppressed sections of women of our society and registers a call for launching a struggle for their emancipation.

A Synoptic View of the Story

The eponymous character, *GulkiBanno* is a poor and an illiterate female with a wrinkled



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face. She is young, aged somewhere between twenty-five and twenty-six years and yet looks not less than eighty. The only child of her parents, Gulki has been married for about five years. Gulki has a stillborn child. And for this “offence”, she is pushed from a staircase by no one else but her husband. She develops a hump on her back and is bent by her curved spine. She can neither stand straight nor can walk without a stick. Left with no support, Gulki gets back to her parental home as her ill-treating husband ousts her from the house. Her parents are no longer alive and she is rendered an orphan. She makes her ends meet with a scanty income by selling vegetables.

Gulki’s sufferings don’t relent even at her parents’ place. For the children of her locality, she is an alien and exotic figure, and nothing less than a freak spectacle, a feast for their eyes. They frequently tease and torment her by asking for her hump to be shown, and once, one of them pours a handful of dust on her vulnerable back and runs away. “Ai kubadi, aikubadi, apnakubaddikhao! Aurekmuthidhuluskipeeth par chhodkarbhaga” (11). They make fun of her by saying, “this is not a hump; rather a bale of money stolen from her husband.” “Arrekubadthodehai! Ohirupayabandhehai pith par. Mansedhu(husband) karupayahai”(11). As if this much ridicule heaped on Gulki were not enough, the children play a game of replicating an old hunchbacked woman, who is kicked during the play. A girl named Matki performs this role with a lure of lemon-juice to be served to her after the show. And the poor Gulki is doomed to see through all this crushing mimicry of hers. When a woman called as *GhenghaBua* reprimands the children for their repulsive act of impersonation, Gulki, however, is not in favor of the children to be treated severely. She rather suffers all this by considering herself as ill-fated. “Arreunhekahenkahobua! Hamarabhag hi khotahai!” (14).

Time passes. Gulki’s husband has arranged another woman for him and fathered a child as well. He needs a maid to look after his baby. Knowing that no one can serve his purpose better than Gulki, he comes to take her back. Satti, a woman from whom Gulki procures vegetables for sale, is infuriated when she comes to know the intent of Gulki’s husband’s coming. Fuming within herself and considering Gulki’s husband no less than a butcher, Satti spurs Gulki to slap him on his face. “Yahikasaihai! Gulki, aagebadhkar mar do chapetaiskemuh par” (20). Satti is



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lost in rumination over the ill-treatment meted out to Gulki by her husband:

“Gulki birthed a child after about five years of her marriage. What’s her fault if it was a stillborn! The rascal pushed her from the staircase and damaged her spine for the whole life. How will she live off from now onwards?”

“Panchsaal bad baal-bachchahua. Abmaraahuabachchapidahua to usmeiniskakyakasur! Saale ne sidhi se dhakeldiya. Zindagibharkeliyehaddikharabhogayina! Abkaisegugarahoiska?” (11-12)

Contrary to Satti’s expectation, Gulki’s response towards her husband was quite amiable. Gulki cried bitterly holding her husband’s feet. “Aadmikepanw par girkefakfakkeronelagi” (20-21). Seeing her crying badly, the neighboring women gather to solace Gulki:

“Don’t cry, daughter! Don’t cry! Mother Sita too suffered an exile. Get up, dear! Change your sari and comb your hair. It’s ominous to present yourself before your husband in such an untidy getup!”

“Mat robitiya! Mat ro! Sitamaiyabhi to vanvasbhoginraha. UthoGulki beta! Dhoti badallev, kanghichotikaro. Patikesamaneaiseaanaasagunhotahai!” (21).

Gulki’s husband had sent a letter asking Gulki to join him before he came in person to fetch her. Smelling Gulki’sunfavorable response over the letter’s plea, the same clusters of neighbouring women gather to gossip:

“Gulki should join her husband, when the latter has sent a letter to her. Husband is husband. Would a woman leave her husband when the latter has kept two wives? Only Lord Ram can save such an impious woman!”

“Jab uskipatriaaihai to Gulkikojanachahiye. Marad to marad. Ekrakhailchhod dui duirakhailrakh le to aurat use chhoddegi? Ram! Ram!” (19).

One of these female folks, seeing a parallel between Gulki’s husband and the Lord



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Krishana, suggests Gulki to disregard her husband's offensive act that metamorphosed her into a hunchback: "God is there! In Mathurapuri, Shri Krishana redeemed KubjaDasi (a female domestic servant), freeing her back from the hump by a miraculous kick. Husband is as good as God, daughter. Fix this in your mind."

"Bhagwanrahenna! TaunMathurapurimeinKubjaDasikolaatmarin to okarkubarsidha hoi gawa. Pati to bhagwanhainbitiya! Oka jaaydev!" (19).

Bit by bit, Gulki's stance towards her husband further softens. Assuring herself, she speaks: "however he may be; after all, he is my husband! Would anyone else come forward to help me in difficult days? A woman must be kept under control by her husband."

"Kuchhbhi hoy. Hai to apnaadmi! Haare-gaadhe koi aurkamaayega? Auratkodabakerakhana hi chahiye" (22).

Carried away in emotion, Gulki takes blame upon herself for her wretchedness. "khot to hami me hai" (22). She thinks that she did something evil and God dispossessed her of the child. She will be blessed with another child when God forgives her. "When she has a child again, *saut*(husband's co-wife) will not rule the roost." "Fir santanhogitb to sautka raj nahichalega" (22).

Her husband, however, exhibits no remorse and change in his attitude towards Gulki. He is as crooked as he has been. He gives a menacing warning and that too openly before taking Gulki back:

"She will have to live as a *dasi*(female-servant). She has not birthed a son. What's her utility for me? She will get food for serving my wife, doing the baby-sitting, and cleaning the house. It will be fatal for her if she quarrels with my wife. My hand is highly unkind. Last time she had a hump, next time she will breathe her last!"

"Rahanahai to daasibankarrahe. Na dudhkina put ki, hamarekaunkamki; par hanauratiyakisewakare, uskabachchakhilaye, jhadu-buharukare to do roti khaaykepadirahe. Par



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kabhiusasezabanladai to khairnahi. Hamara hath zalimhai. Ek bar kubadnikala, agli bar parannikalega!” (22).

Writhing in pain, Gulki, supported by a woman, mounted a horse-pulled-cart and left for her husband’s home, at last.

A Critical Appraisal

A glance at the synoptic view of the story would suggest that the text revolves around the vulnerable life of GulkiBanno soaked in unbearable pain and sufferings. Through this story, Dharamvir Bharti takes the female body (that of Gulki)—entrenched in a web of discursive relations of control, subordination, stigmatization, and othering--as a site of analysis, contemplation, and social critique by highlighting the oppressive gender norms and awful social attitudes heaped on it (the female body). The text uncovers the power dynamics operating through the institution of marriage and its disciplinary control mechanism operating on women. Conditioned and fed by the misogynist cultural norms, Gulki’s husband feels so privileged that he can take liberty to treat his wife worse than an animal. Blindfolded by the male-chauvinist cultural attitudes, the man loses his temper and goes violent to the extent of damaging Gulki’s spine irretrievably, when she gives birth to a deceased child. He never realizes that it’s no fault of hers and she didn’t do this on purpose. He throws her out of the house as an undesired object (since Gulki doesn’t bear him a son) and gets her substitute without any delay and guilt.

The story also unmask the malevolent effect of the culturally sanctioned myths on women’s psyche. The women folks, who have internalized the “wisdom” ingrained in narratives of *KubjaDasi* and *Sita*, counsel Gulki—who is already pushed at the margin of the social order/system--to be unmindful of her husband’s wrongs and transgressions. By virtue of being positioned as a wife, Gulki “ought to” go on doing her customary duty religiously, and compromising her interests and well-being, even if she is heaped on with ill-treatment and cruelty by her spouse! Gulki, however, is no less wrapped up in and distracted by patriarchal ideologies than those women who discourse with her. Despite all her vulnerabilities and



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sufferings stacked on her by her husband, Gulki herself comes to exalt her man's domineering trait: "Auratkodabakerakhana hi chahiye" (22). She is persistently haunted by the culturally sanctioned mechanism of interpretation and assessment of her wifely position and imperatives ensuing from it.

GulkiBanno suffers from an inflicted hump on her back. Children, raised and reinforced with the culturally produced able-bodied norms, find Gulki's twisted body very queer and unusual at the very first sight. They stare at Gulki finding her figure very unsightly. Trapped in a normative framework, and rooted in a particular historical and cultural context, teenagers derive a strange pleasure in teasing Gulki for her bodily difference. Her undesirable body becomes a source of entertainment for the youngsters, whose mocking replication of Gulki's fractured frame/physique is an outcome of the mainstream ableist fantasy. The children's unpleasant attitudes and their individual acts of making a ridicule of the exceptional body of Gulki is a consequence of social and institutional mechanisms that go on producing and perpetuating abhorrence and anxiety towards the differently abled and making the latter's life unliveable and miserable. By virtue of being young and innocent, the children may be excused and exonerated for their offence. However, the moot question still remains: how to rectify and disrupt their cultural unconscious that acts as a repository of the ugly feelings towards the disabled? What to do to undo the deeply entrenched eugenicist⁵ perceptions so that the youngsters and the society as a whole for that matter become accommodative of persons with unconventional bodies?

Dharamveer Bharti through the character of GulkiBanno raises larger cultural questions and concerns with regard to the conditions of women, who are subjected to multiple oppressions and exclusions in society. A reflection on the fate and position of Gulki reveals that women suffer on multiple fronts of class, gender and disability. Gulki—wants to live and thrive--has to pay a hefty price simply for being female. So, as long as the oppressive cultural tools, designs, systems and practices that continue to objectify, stigmatize, and devalue women are not repudiated and refashioned, even the able-bodied women will continue to suffer and be agency-denied, let alone the impaired ones. It goes without saying that any physical or cognitive



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deformity (congenital or inflicted one) makes life difficult. However, the challenging issue is the cultural stigmatization and stereotyping that result in stunting and marginalization of the affected person/s. Interrogation and analysis of such commonplace habits, beliefs, and perceptions pertaining to gender and disability are essential. Action and mobilization against the conservative and hardened social structures and postulates of the two identity categories—gender and body--are crucial for emancipation of women and effecting social change.

Our real enemy is not individuals, but the system which divides us, which creates our disability, which makes it possible for others to profit from our exclusion: it's convenient and easy to highlight people, but the focus of our age and our action should be structures (T. Shakespeare qtd. in Michel Oliver, 168).

Notes

1. The story *GulkiBanno*(Gulki the Bride) written in Hindi is unavailable in English, at least to my knowledge. Reading the story from gender and disability perspectives primarily, this article does not address several other concerns of the story as property-greed, moral-hypocrisy, space-crisis, and a delineation of the minor disabled characters. However, to retain the ironically nuanced, satirical and humorous elements and impulse enhancing the aesthetics and ethos of the story, quotes from the text have been used profusely in both English translation (done by the author of the article) as well as Hindi transliterated in English.

2. The term “normalcy” designates a set of culturally constructed and sanctioned norms and practices operating in a particular period and society to draw distinctions between normal/able bodied people and the disabled ones. Like sexism, racism and caste-discourses, this expression also marks social discrimination and oppression that disabled people are subjected to.

3. The expression “aesthetic-nervousness” introduced by an African literary critic, AtoQuayson, signifies a sense of discomfort or uneasiness that disable bodies/figures arouse among the able-bodied.



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4. The term “narrative prosthesis” was coined by the two disability scholars, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder in their book, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disabilities and the Dependencies of Discourse*, published in 2001. The expression marks the dependence of narratives and films for their use of disability as a device, symbol, motif or metaphor to evoke such emotions as pity and fear or to mark some social anomaly.

5. A perception or belief that advocates and promotes the reproduction and retention of persons with able bodies and intelligent minds only and denigrates the persons with physical or mental disadvantages.

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