



Deconstructing Disability

Smrity Jayara

Abstract:

In this paper, I have aimed at subverting and redefining the way in which disability is commonly perceived. The roots of the existing prejudice against the differently abled people have been explored. Thereafter, I tried to establish that disability is not about the physical ability or inability of a person, rather it has more to do with the cultural construction and stereotypical discriminatory attitude of the society towards it. The existence of concepts like “normal”, “normalcy” and “normate” have been questioned and the redundancy of these structures is proven. I have used literature as my critical lens for dissecting the attitude with which disability has been understood and portrayed. My paper advocates the inclusion of the differently abled people into the mainstream society.

Keywords: Disability, Stigmatization, Normalcy, Normate, Medical Model, Social Model

The stigmatization of disabled people has existed since the beginning of civilization. Be it the Romans or the Greeks, the Christians or the Jews, all societies believed in the perfection of mind and body. Anything that could not be qualified in the defined norms set by the community was considered dangerous in a society that worshipped homogeneity. As a result of the same, disability was identified as an “abhorrent defect” that needed to be either rectified, cured or destroyed (Moore and Slee 228). The families of the differently abled individuals would either have to commit infanticide or abandon their “defected” child at birth. Disability was seen as a secret that was to be buried inside the four walls of the house because of its noncompliance with the ordained conventions of the society.

In those times when people were obsessed with the notion of ideal bodies, any deviance from the “normal” led to disorganization, as it would stand as a challenge to the already established standards. This disorganization was a consequence of “the psychological fear of the abnormal” (or the fear of the unknown), that this digression would pose in front of the



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

2

majority (Barnes 4). To resolve the issue of a disoriented society, it became necessary to categorize these persons with disabilities. “Changelings,” “monsters,” “sinners,” “cursed,” “invalids,” “cripples,” “handicaps,” “freaks,” “beggars,” “retarded,” “disabled” etc are some of the labels used to refer to the persons with disabilities. Henri-Jacques Stiker in his book *The History of Disability* talks about this ritual of nomenclature. He states that when we name “it is the DIFFERENCE, untamed and unshared, that we designate; a difference without circumstance, without site; a raw difference that cannot be relegated somewhere, against which we must *protect ourselves*, a difference that generates a dark terror” (6). Majority of the terms attached to the persons with disabilities have a negative connotation, implying that “human life is not ready to accept “that,” because exceptional measures and procedures are always called for, because we have to turn to specialized persons and institutions, and so on” (Stiker 5). It is quite evident from Stiker’s observation that these different members were from the beginning marginalised for their differences.

Disability studies scholars have tried to discern the image that society envisages as the ideal type to remove differently abled people from the centre. Lenard J Davis and Rosemarie Garland Thompson use the terms “normalcy” and “normate” to outline the characteristics of people who would stand as the epitome of an ideal “normal” person. Garland defines “normate” as the “constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (8). Thus, “normal” people use their capability to produce more as their justification for stepping up as the dominant ones of the society. Davis conjectures the identity of his “normal” as someone who harmoniously syncs in with the well-defined norms while the individuals who deviate from these parameters constitute the “others.” Davis concludes that in this paradigm, “the majority of bodies fall under the main umbrella of the curve. Those who do not are at the extremes—and are therefore abnormal” (101).

The ideal prototype of a “normal” being is similar to an illusion masquerading at the horizon. All these immaculate designs for a perfect human being are constructed by the “normal” society to subjugate the differently abled individuals. Alan Gartner in one of his essays has paralleled the discrimination faced by the disabled to racism:



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

3

Just as whites have imposed their images upon blacks, and men upon women, people without disabilities have imposed their image upon people who are disabled. These images have told us not only what is beautiful-and right; they have also warned us that the image of disability is ugly- and evil. (31)

The categorisation of the disabled people according to the societal constructions made them the marginal constituents, the “others” of the society. Due to their visible inabilities they were seen as a burden, as people in need of care and charity. As Quayson mentions:

Disability was closely aligned to disease and disease was often interpreted as a form of plague and punishment for past sins, along with the encouragement to charity there also persisted an idea of disability as a sign of divine disfavour. (23)

The “personal tragedy” of a disabled person was perceived as something that needed to be prevented, treated or cured: “the assumption is, in health terms, that disability is pathology and, in welfare terms disability is a social problem... To have a disability is to have ‘something wrong with you’” (Barnes et al. 32). This lens through which disability was perceived as a pitiable condition that needed to be fixed, was constructed in the mid-1800s. It foregrounds the disability, veiling their independent side and paints them as the dependent individuals.

The most common mode of propagating the characteristic ideals of a “normal” person is by either using the means of media like radio and television or by using literature. Literature is not just the mirror of the society but is also one of the assets that helps in shaping the outlook of masses. Readers try to relate with the characters of different works and in the process, consciously or unconsciously, end up getting hued with the author’s ideas. Literature is the ledger that contains the account of discrimination faced by disabled people (their portrayal as monsters and villains), their struggles, the society’s pessimistic outlook towards them and their rising above all the odds. It is also an alibi of the cultural shifts that affected and helped in improving the conditions of these different members of the society.



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

4

The short story *The Birthmark* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the author gives a peek into the mind-set of the society of the time when the “Medical Model” of disability, that saw disability (objectively) as a medical defect that needed to be cured, was prevalent. The story shows the death (which could also be seen as a murder) of the character Georgiana, at the hands of her frenzied scientist husband who had become obsessed with a small imperfection on her face. He was unable to rest till he was not allowed to use his scientific skills to make his beloved “perfect.” This obsession with perfection is a manifestation of the imposed societal dictates and illustrates the extremes to which a person can go to save himself and his loved ones from the scrutiny of others. But the problem with humans is, as Georgina also reckons, “mind would forever be on the march, always requiring something newer, better and more perfect”(N. P). The story also gives the moral that in trying so hard to improve the imperfections, humans forget that they had been perfect all along.

While observing the representation of disabled people in literature it can be noted that they were mostly portrayed in the negative light and were seldom given the lead role, making them stand out either as villains or as beggars. This constructed cynical image would in turn influence and shape the perception of the audience. An example for the same is Richard, the villain of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. His twisted body is shown as the personification of treachery, etching a pessimistic picture of disabled people in the minds of the readers (Barker and Murray 2). Richard’s disability that is put in the spotlight “brings together various threads that serve to focalize the question of whether Richard’s deformity is an insignia of or indeed the cause of his villainy” (Quayson 48).

Another example where a disabled character has been given the lead role, but has a malicious personality is the “monomaniacal” Captain of the ship Pequod, Ahab from Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick*. His disability can be seen as a threat because

...[it]centers upon one (human) monster's indefatigable pursuit of another (mammalian) monster that places the lives of the rest of the able-bodied crew at risk. While the monstrosity of the latter issues from its definitional inaccessibility, however, the former's monstrous nature is secured by a largely



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

5

unchallenged story that yokes disability to insanity, obsessive revenge, and the alterity of bodily variation. (Mitchell and Snyder 121)

David Michell and Sharon Snyder in their work *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* state, “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight. Bodies show up in stories as dynamic entities that resist or refuse the cultural scripts assigned to them” (49). They further elucidated, “disability pervades literary narrative, first as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device” (47). Characters like Laura from *The Glass Menagerie*, Tim Cratchit from *A Christmas Carol* and Boo Radley from *To Kill A Mocking Bird* are some of the examples of the characters that play a minor role in the novels or are assigned a role that has been used as a metaphorical foil for portraying something evil to bring to light the good in the protagonist.

Industrial revolution is also one of the key factors responsible for manufacturing a pessimistic outlook towards the differently abled people. The revolution added great wealth to the economy but, combined with the capitalist ideals, furthered the negative way in which society would look at disability. The capitalist system valued abled-bodied working men and declared others as a useless. The caliber of a person was dependent only on the number of hours they devoted to manual labor. This economic revolution also affected the way in which the differently-abled perceived themselves. As physical labor was considered the only meaningful contribution of an individual towards their society, the differently abled people were again sidetracked and left to fend for themselves in the competitive environment. Marta Russell, because of the oppression faced by the disabled people, gave a new meaning to disability by positing that it is “a social creation which defines who is offered a job and who is not, and what it means varies with the level of economic activity” (Rosenthal “Introduction”).

The cultural violence against the persons with disabilities continued mainly till the mid-twentieth century. By this time the world had witnessed catastrophic events like the two world wars. The number of disabled people, especially the people suffering from mental



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

6

illnesses like the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, had increased exponentially as a grave consequence of those large- scaled wars. The major price paid by the countries was in the form of loss of thousands of lives and destruction of infrastructures. What never goes accounted for in all the statistical analysis is the psychological cost that the veterans who survived those disasters had to pay at the individual level. Richard Gabriel in his work *No More Heroes: Madness and Psychiatry in War* states:

Nations customarily measure the 'costs of war' in dollars, lost production, or the number of soldiers killed or wounded. Rarely do military establishments attempt to measure the costs of war in terms of individual suffering. Psychiatric breakdown remains one of the most costly items of war when expressed in human terms. (N.P)

Numerous veterans post these tragic wars were left disabled and mentally unstable. It was only after the post-war fervour had settled that personal memoirs documenting the physical and psychological impact of war on soldiers and their families began emerging. These documents brought the unseen horrors of the war to the forefront of societal debates. The World Wars brought disability to every nook and cranny of the western society, in turn catalysing the introduction and acceptance of disabled people in the mainstream culture.

Later with the coming forward and acknowledging of close encounters with disability by popular figures, like President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Kennedy family and Nobel Prize winner Pearl S Buck, about having close encounters with disabilities provided the disabled people a ray of hope. World witnessed the breaking away of a cultural taboo which had long coerced people into hiding their disability. Getting motivated by these revelations, persons with disabilities resisted against the literal and literary discrimination that had put them in the list of the "others" or the "abnormal" individuals. The persons with disabilities had started "coming out," which Ellen Samuels defines as:

a process of redefinition of one's personal identity through rejecting the tyranny of the *normate*, positive recognition of impairment and embracing disability as a valid social identity. Having come out, the disabled person no longer regards



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

7

disability as a reason for self-disgust, or as something to be denied or hidden, but rather as an imposed oppressive social category to be challenged and broken down. (319)

With the “coming out,” a process of amending definitions of the terminologies attached with disability also began. Research was undertaken for the better understanding of the concept of disability with respect to the role that the society plays in the life of a differently abled person. The “social model” of disability was introduced that highlighted society as a key factor responsible for the ostracization of persons with disabilities. One of the main documents that supported this claim was the manifesto published by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) which stated:

... it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society. (4)

This awakening of the deprived and discriminated disabled people motivated them to assert their rights and equal position in the society. This model helps in relocating the problem from “the individual, to the barriers and attitudes which disable her” (Shakespeare 217). It motivated the differently abled people to assert their individualism, and helped in desecrating the established models that promoted homogeneity in the order. It prompted disabled people to accept their disability as a “valid social identity” that had to be regarded as “an imposed oppressive social category [that needs] to be challenged and broken down” (Samuels 319). This new approach to disability helped in the concoction of the present-day definition of disability, that is:

the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

8

social activities. Physical disability is therefore a particular form of social oppression. (UPIAS 14)

For creating awareness and for sensitizing the populace for the equal treatment of the differently abled people, writers used their words to help break the previously existing stereotypes. The short story, *Cathedral* by Raymond Carver depicts the one of the main characters as a naïve man who is visited by a blind person, a friend of his wife. The narrator confesses to his audience that all the knowledge he had about blindness and blind people was shaped by movies or popular media. He was under the impression that “the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing eye dogs” (91). He acknowledges that there were things that he had never imagined a blind man doing, like keeping a full beard, smoking and watching TV. The protagonist’s interaction with the blind man in the story changed his views and enabled him to see the world through the eyes of that blind man. Stories that give a peek into the life of differently abled people, were being propagated to change the perception of their “normal” audience.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is another work in which the readers embark on a journey with a 15-year old protagonist who suffers from autism. The author Mark Haddon has taken an autistic child as his narrator to make the public understand that the differentlyabled people are not the only ones who deviate from the norms and mores of society. Patterns of deviations can be observed in the so-called “normal” ones also. Christopher, the protagonist states:

All the other children at my school are stupid. Except I’m not meant to call them stupid, even though this is what they are. I’m meant to say that they have learning difficulties or that they have special needs. But this is stupid because everyone has learning difficulties because learning to speak French or understanding relativity is difficult and also everyone has special needs, like Father, who has to carry a little packet of artificial sweetening tablets around with him to put in his coffee to stop him from getting fat, or Mrs. Peters, who wears a beige-coloured hearing aid, or Siobhan, who has glasses so thick that



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

9

they give you a headache if you borrow them, and none of these people are Special Needs, even if they have special needs. (Haddon)

This observation of Christopher makes it clear that no one is perfect. Each person is eccentric in their own ways. The novel stands as a proof for the readers that persons with disabilities are more than their inabilities. The impression about disability as being a portent of difficulties needs to be amended because now persons with disabilities are standing at par with the “normal” people.

The innovative intervention of science and technology is one of the tools that has helped persons with disabilities in becoming independent. Now, most of them do not see their disability as their weakness but they have embraced their disability and used it as their strength. Temple Grandin, for example, is a renowned animal expert who has authored two books *Animals in Translation* and *Animals Make Us Human* and she is also an active advocate for autistic people. She was diagnosed with autism at the age of two. Her high-functioning autism enabled her to articulate her life experiences in great depth. She puts forward that it was because of her insights and heightened sensitivity towards things that helped her make her valuable contributions in the field of animal welfare (“Temple Grandin”). She stated, “If I could snap my fingers and be non-autistic, I would not. Autism is part of what I am” (Vultaggio).

Donna Williams, the author of four autobiographies *Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic Girl*, *Somebody Somewhere: Breaking Free from the World of Autism*, *Like Colour to the Blind: Soul Searching and Soul Finding* and *Everyday Heaven: Journeys Beyond the Stereotypes of Autism* also suffered from autism. She describes that art was her way of achieving her freedom and understanding the world. She states, “my mind was like a mosaic, my conscious thoughts intangible until I experienced them after they'd been expressed- usually through arts” (“Personal Space”). She is one of those activists who worked endlessly for the aid and betterment of the people affected with autism.

It is the “need” which tags you as a disabled and not the person. The lives of the many activists and popular figures like Hellen Keller and Alice Wong point to the fact that if given equal amenities like their “normal” counterparts, the disabled people can also polish their



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

10

talents and come out as distinguished members of the community. The idea is to subvert the institution that fabricates fallacious notions about disability. Struggles in life are part and parcel for everyone and if some members of the society have a more difficult path to follow, it does not mean that they are to be segregated from the general public. The society needs to accept these differently abled individuals and provide them an equal platform so that they can also be productive citizens. Literature and other media should be used to propagate the image of self-dependent hard working differently abled individuals. Masses need to be sensitized and mental barriers need to be destroyed. Inclusion in the mainstream would encourage and enable persons with disabilities to give their contribution in the progress of society.

Works Cited

Primary Sources:

- Barker, Clare, and Stuart Murray, editors. "Introduction: On Reading Disability in Literature." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*. Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 1-13.
- Barnes, Collins. "A Legacy of Oppression: A History of Disability in Western Culture." *Disability Studies: Past Present and Future*, edited by Len Barton and Mike Oliver, Leeds: The Disability Press, 1997, pp. 3-24.
- Barnes, Collin, Geof Mercer, and Tom Shakespeare. *Exploring Disability*. Polity Press, 1999.
- Carver, Raymond. "Cathedral." *Cathedral: Stories*. Vintage Contemporaries ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1989, pp. 91-101.
- Davis, Lennard. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London: Verso, 1995.
- Gabriel, Richard A. *No More Heroes: Madness & Psychiatry in War*. Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 1988.
- Gartner, Alan. "Images of the Disabled: Disabling Images." *The Disability Rag*. New York: Praeger, 1984, pp. 31-46.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

11

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Birthmark." VOA, VOA - Voice of America English News, 17 July 2015, learningenglish.voanews.com/a/birthmark-nathaniel-hawthorne/117091.html.

Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003.

Moore, Michele, and Roger Slee. "Disability Studies, Inclusive Education and Exclusion." *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, edited by Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas, Routledge, 2012, pp. 225- 239.

Mitchell, David T, and Sharon L Synder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. The University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. Columbia University Press, 2007.

Rosenthal, Keith, editor. *Capitalism & Disability: Selected Writings by Marta Russell*. Haymarket Books, 2019.

Sayers, William, translator. *A History of Disability*. By Henri- Jacques Stiker. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 1999.

Samuels, Ellen. "My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming Out." *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, Routledge, 2014, pp. 316- 32.

Shakespeare, Tom. "The Social Model". *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, Routledge, 2013, pp. 214- 221.

"Temple Grandin." *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 15 Apr. 2019, <https://www.biography.com/activist/temple-grandin>.

Thompson, Rosemarie G. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1997.



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

12

UPIAS. *Fundamental Principles of Disability*. Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, London, 1976.

Vultaggio, Maria. "Autism Awareness Quotes 2016: 12 Sayings by Temple Grandin, Jenny McCarthy and More." *International Business Times*, 1 Apr. 2016, <https://www.ibtimes.com/autism-awareness-quotes-2016-12-sayings-temple-grandin-jenny-mccarthy-more-2346552>.

Williams, Donna. "Personal Space." *Donna Williams: About Me*, www.donnawilliams.net/index185b.html?id=about.

Secondary Sources:

Barker, Clare, and Stuart Murray, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Barnes, Collins. "A Legacy of Oppression: A History of Disability in Western Culture." *Disability Studies: Past Present and Future*, edited by Len Barton and Mike Oliver, Leeds: The Disability Press, 1997, pp. 3-24.

Barnes, Collin, Geof Mercer, and Tom Shakespeare. *Exploring Disability*. Polity Press, 1999.

Buck, Pearl S. *The Child Who Never Grew: A Memoir*. New York: Open Road Media, 2017.

Carver, Raymond. "Cathedral." *Cathedral: Stories*. Vintage Contemporaries ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1989, pp. 91-101.

Costello, Chris. "How Capitalism Contributes to Ableism." *The Mighty*, 30 July 2017, <https://themighty.com/2017/10/how-capitalism-contributes-to-ableism/>.

Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol*. Athenaeum Classics, 2019.

Davis, Lennard J, editor. *The Disability Studies Reader*. Routledge, 2014.

Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London: Verso, 1995.



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

13

Gabriel, Richard A. *No More Heroes: Madness & Psychiatry in War*. Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 1988.

Gartner, Alan. "Images of the Disabled: Disabling Images." *The Disability Rag*. New York: Praeger, 1984, pp. 31-46.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Birthmark." VOA, VOA - Voice of America English News, 17 July 2015, learningenglish.voanews.com/a/birthmark-nathaniel-hawthorne/117091.html.

Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003.

Kovic, Ron. *Born on the Fourth of July*. New York: Akashic Books, 2016.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. Random House, 2014.

Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. Signet Classics, 2013.

Mitchell, David T, and Sharon L Synder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. The University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. Columbia University Press, 2007.

Rosenthal, Keith, editor. *Capitalism & Disability: Selected Writings by Marta Russell*. Haymarket Books, 2019.

Sayers, William, translator. *A History of Disability*. By Henri- Jacques Stiker. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 1999.

Shakespeare, William. *Richard III*. New York: Methuen, 1981.

"Temple Grandin." *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 15 Apr. 2019, <https://www.biography.com/activist/temple-grandin>.

Thompson, Rosemarie G. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1997.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

14

UPIAS. *Fundamental Principles of Disability*. Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, London, 1976.

Vultaggio, Maria. "Autism Awareness Quotes 2016: 12 Sayings by Temple Grandin, Jenny McCarthy and More." *International Business Times*, 1 Apr. 2016, <https://www.ibtimes.com/autism-awareness-quotes-2016-12-sayings-temple-grandin-jenny-mccarthy-more-2346552>.

Watson, Nick, and Simo Vehmas, editors. *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*. Routledge, 2012.

Williams, Donna. "Personal Space." *Donna Williams: About Me*, www.donnawilliams.net/index185b.html?id=about.

Williams, Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie*. New York: Spark Publishing, 2003.