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Book Review

**Someshwar Sati, G.J.V. Prasad, Ritwick Bhattacharjee. (2022). *Reclaiming the Disabled***

***Subject: Representing Disability in Short Fiction* by. India: Bloomsbury India, 288 pages.**

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Reviewed by R. Nandana

Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

BITS- Pilani Hyderabad Campus, India

[P20200034@hyderabad.bits-pilani.ac.in](mailto:P20200034@hyderabad.bits-pilani.ac.in)

Reclaiming or reclamation is often an act of resistance that destabilises and dismantles the dominant discourses of history. It also deconstructs the power-embedded binaries moulded by the norms that govern the collective consciousness of a society. The book *Reclaiming the Disabled Subject: Representing Disability in Short Fiction* edited by Someshwar Sati, G.J.V Prasad, and Rithwik Bhattacharjee, materialises an attempt to represent and reclaim the identity of disabled subjectivities that are mythified, mystified and misrepresented historically. The seventeen short stories included in the book develop a map that delineates the politics of ableism - the hegemony of ‘normalcy’, the *narrative prostheticizing* of ‘abnormal’ body-minds, structuring physical and social worlds that construct the myth of able-bodiedness. The seventeen short stories in this volume which were written in twelve different languages - Gujrathi, Odia, Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, Urdu, Assamese, Malayalam, Punjabi, Marathi, Telugu and Kannada - mark the notions of norm and normal across time and culture. The introduction for each story provided by the editors is helpful and insightful as they critically examine the stories with a lens of disability studies.

Critically engaging with disability studies, these stories are translated by literary scholars and translators with the express purpose of reclaiming disability subjectivity. For instance, in several translations of Rabindranath Tagore's story "Subha", the eponymous character with speech impairment is described as "dumb". Since the word "dumb" has pejorative undertones, Banibrata Mahanta uses the more accepted word, "mute" in the translation included in this volume. Unlike other translations, Subha's language is not described in terms of 'lack'; instead Mahanta implies that people could not understand her because they used different languages.

The short stories in this volume emerge from a variety of Indian languages at various points of time and thereby reflect the social, cultural and political dimensions of disability in respective societies within a particular time frame and regional context. These short stories range from Rabindranath Tagore's "Subha" which was published in 1912 in Bengali language to the recently published Malayalam short story, "Three Blind Men Describe an Elephant", written by the contemporary Malayalam writer E. Santoshkumar. The editorial team of this volume has edited and published another book in 2020 titled *Disability in Translation: The Indian Experience* in which the editors share their experience of contemplating the organisation of a workshop on translating disability short stories in Indian literature. They describe how they received responses from their colleagues who raised serious suspicions about the existence of enough disability short stories within the canon of Indian literature to conduct such a translation workshop. Proving the raised suspicions wrong, the editors succeeded in listing more than 80 disability short stories from 12 different Indian languages. However, the initial response of suspicion and apprehension that whether there are enough disability short stories in Indian literature to translate, mark the invisibility of disability fiction which is not incidental. It raises the question of centrality of disability in the disability narratives that exist within the canon of Indian literature.

Postcolonial literature, partition literature, speculative fictions based on Hindu epics such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* constitute a major domain of the canon of Indian literature. Claire Barker rightly points out that in postcolonial literature, disability is used as a “prosthetic metaphor” to extend the narrative of colonial legacy and its detrimental effects on the colonised as in Salman Rushdie's *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*. The partition literature that includes Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* also employs characters with disability as a metaphor to represent the 'nation's wound'. In *Mahabharata*, the character Dhritarashtra's visual impairment is depicted as symbolic of his evilness and greed, just as the way Manthara's orthopaedic disability is appropriated to her viciousness in *Ramayana*.

The use of disability metaphors deprives the texts of the central framing of disability as a lived experience. It is the historical sidelining of disability in disability fiction within the canon of Indian literature that has caused a collective oblivion about the existence of disability short stories. Hence the book *Reclaiming the Disabled Subject* is a reminder which also reframes the existing canon of Indian literature that resists the erasure of disability narratives. Reinventing a new platform for discussions on the discursive constitution of disability, the book underscores the lived experiences of people with disabilities and the factors such as gender, caste, class, and religion which influence the experiences of embodiment.

Although the 17 short stories included in the volume are disability centric short stories, a few of them use disability as a metaphorical device and a trope to push the narrative. However, Bolwar Mahamad Kunhi's short story, “Dhrushti” and E. Santoshkumar's short story, “Three Blind Men Describe an Elephant” depart from this convention by attempting to subvert the common perception of disability. For instance, the plot of the story, “Dhrushti” begins when Sulaiman, a migrant worker who returns to his village after years. As the plot progresses, certain tension is

developed when everyone in the village tries to conceal the ‘horrendous’ news from Sulaiman; however, only in the end, the news about Sulaiman’s child’s disability is unravelled which had been hidden from him for years. Reflecting one of the common reactions of the society towards disability in which disability is perceived as disgrace or shame, the characters in the story hide the news of the child’s disability from his father. Despite the discouraging responses from the people around, Sulaiman’s composure at knowing about his son’s disability leads to a non-conventional and non-tragic ending. This story brilliantly and effectively subverts the age-old use of disability as a tragic trope or a tool to create melodrama, across literature. Similarly, in the story, “Three Blind Men Describe an Elephant”, the narrator encounters three visually impaired people which challenges the narrator’s understanding of ‘being blind’. As they continue to converse, the narrator’s illusion of the presence of a distinct line that demarcates his world from that of theirs, diffuses. When the narrator asks them of their opinion about the age-old parable of ‘three blind men and an elephant’, they explain their experience of knowing an elephant which were entirely different from each other. Unlike the parable in which the three blind men fight with each other arguing that an elephant is a broom, pillar, and dustpan depending on the body parts of the elephant that they touched, in the story the characters including the narrator discuss their concept of an elephant harmoniously and accept every reality. Here, disability is not a limitation, rather it is an enabling and liberating experience that accommodates diversity.

Another distinguishing feature of this book is its potential contribution to the feminist disability studies from the vantage point of the global south. The stories include Medha Trivedi’s “Vishakha”, Ishwar Petlikar’s “Ties of Blood”, Mahadevi Varma’s “Gungiya”, Rabindranath Tagore’s “Subha”, Rashid Jahan’s “Woh” and T. Jayakanthan’s “The Incomplete Being”, translated from Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and Tamil discuss the experiences of disabled

women characters in a patriarchal and ableist society. As Nandini Ghosh argues that “the thrust of normalization is both gendered and ability centred”, the norms of normalcy and beauty affect women with disabilities disproportionately (105). Additionally, the stories present the stigma and undesirability of disabled women and the consequent rejection after marriage due to the apprehensions regarding their capability to fulfil normative marital duties which include caregiving, reproductive health and the ability to carry out the domestic chores. An Indian experience of being a woman with disability is reflected in the constant instances of rejection, exclusion, and alienation of disabled women characters in the short stories. It is also remarkable that the book includes the works of prominent writers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Mahadevi Varma, whose works have actively engaged with the Indian women’s plight and oppression, shaping a feminist framework in Indian literature.

The volume, in keeping with Lennard Davis's assessment, is a “blend of scholarship and creativity” (Sati et al) which will definitely enable the scholars working in literary and cultural disability studies to identify and analyse disability narratives in Indian literature. For the scholars who engage in feminist disability studies, the book will also be relevant and resourceful since many short stories in this volume along with the critical commentary for each story engages the reader with the nuances of the embodied experience of women from different social, cultural and linguistic communities. Although several stories in the edited volume use disability metaphorically and at times stereotypically, the efforts of the editors and translators to present this critically is worthy of note. Besides the editors’ attempt to bring together the short stories on disability fulfils the primary motive of this project which is to resist invisibilization, erasure and non-recognition of the presence of disability narratives within Indian literature. Additionally, translation itself becomes a way of representation which endeavours to challenge the social and cultural notions of

norm that reflect in language (Davison 18). Hence, here, translation is essentially a socio-political act that enables the reclamation of the disabled subject through transforming (or transcreating) words that carry social bias and stigma towards disability.

However, providing the critical commentary before the respective story may prevent the reader from forming their own critical perspective about a particular story. Besides, the inclusion of translators' notes along with each story would have provided the reader with a sense of the meaning of certain words in their respective language- how these words define and describe disability in different socio-cultural spaces- and also the experience of translating them into English.

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