



The Politics of Representation of Intellectual Disability In Select Indian Fiction

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ABSTRACT:- This paper includes four main stream writers of Indian origin, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Jaisree Misra and Anita Desai who have effectively projected an Intellectually Disabled character into mainstream writing. Though many a reading has been done on these writers, one aspect of scrutiny that has been constantly overlooked is the politics of representation of the Intellectually Disabled in their works. Over the years, aided by the changing governmental policies, there has been a paradigm shift in the understanding of Intellectual Disability. This paper attempts to reread literature with Cultural Studies and Disability Studies and critique the writer's representation of the Intellectually Disabled.

Keywords: Autism, Disability Studies, Indian literature, Intellectual disability, Subaltern

I. INTRODUCTION

People with diminished mental capacity have always been pushed to the margins. This paper includes four main stream writers of Indian origin, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Jaisree Misra and Anita Desai who have effectively projected an Intellectually Disabled character into mainstream writing. Though many a reading has been done on these writers, one aspect of scrutiny that has been constantly overlooked is the politics of representation of the Intellectually Disabled in their works. Intellectual Disability is an umbrella term that encompasses various intellectual deficits like mental retardation, learning disability, autism, dyslexia, acquired brain injuries and dementia. It does not include madness or mental imbalance due to trauma.

Mistry's, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), Jaisree Misra's *Ancient Promises*(2000) and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of The day*(2007) introduce strong Intellectually Disabled characters who play a pivotal role in the thread of the text. These works produce forms of subjectivity within specific discursive fields and the power relations promote particular meanings, interests and even forms of resistance.

The holistic images that works of fiction achieve, leave us with the feeling that we know what we may have never seen or gone through. The primary function of fiction is narration and not instruction. The authors rely on a shared sense of knowledge between themselves and the reader. According to Anupama Iyer in "Depiction of Intellectual Disability in Fiction", this shared understanding depends on what is culturally accepted about the condition as well as what is medically known. (127) Thus literary depictions unlike medical depictions do not have to be accurate or theory driven. Despite the lack of factual fidelity, literary depictions shape the cultural image of a condition much more than medical information because of their reach and availability.

II. INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*

Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, has its setting in the turbulent post independent India, where the stench of the rotting governmental system, percolates into simple families like that of the protagonist, Gustad Noble and causes havoc. Intertwining the personal and the political, Mistry has masterfully woven the upheavals in the two fronts' the political influencing the personal. Yet, innocent of all the turmoil or changes around him is the Intellectually Disabled Tehmul.

Tehmul's disabled body is seen as a venue of violation. Rights of the Intellectually Disabled, virtually nonexistent in the period are mirrored effectively in the text. Tehmul lives at the sympathy of the people around him. His guardian, his brother, is notable by his absence. In the latter half of the text, with the proximity of the impending war, Tehmul is seen to fend for himself. In addition to being Intellectually Disabled, he is lame, not by birth, but by an accident, hence gaining the name Tehmul lungraa. Set at a time when the dichotomous pull of rationality and superstition played an equal weight on confused minds, Dilnaviz (Gustad's wife) feeds an innocent Tehmul charmed potions which would save her family from an evil eye and would make him more inconsistent. The guileless Tehmul, elated at the prospect of the sweetened drink laps it up, unknowing of the horrors it contains.

Physical disability is visible in many characters in the text including the protagonist Gustad who has a visible limp. If physical disability is accepted as a state of life or a phase of age, Intellectual Disability is seen more harshly by the society. Mistry's Tehmul at best is a nuisance and at worst is a menace.

Tehmul's characterization by the author deserves notice as he is seen as a child housed in a grown up body. Though in his mid-thirties, Tehmul is said to prefer the company of children to that of adults. His habit of "always wearing a big grin" (31), uncoordinated hand and feet movements, scratching of the groin and armpits (which made women complain about him that he did it deliberately to annoy them), habit of trailing people till he is waved off, mark him vividly as an Intellectually Disabled. Still, it is Tehmul's vocabulary that stands out significantly. As Mistry's narrator notes,

"The words of Tehmul- Lungraa's abbreviated vocabulary always emerged at breakneck speed, whizzing incomprehensibly past the listener's ear. It was as if some internal adjustment had been made to make up for the slowness of his legs with the velocity of his tongue. But the result was extreme frustration for both Tehmul and the listener.....GustadGustadchickenrace. GustadGustadchickenranfastfast. IcaughtIcaughtGustad." (31/32)

Tehmul's violence catches the attention of the readers as Mistry portrays a detailed description of the slaughter of the rats. He earned his keep by catching rats in the apartment building and handing it over to the municipal ward office in exchange for a little amount of money. Tehmul kills it by pouring boiling water little by little on the squirming rats and killing them.

"As the rats'squealed and writhed in agony, he watched their reactions with great interest, particularly their tails, proud of the pretty colours he could bestow on them. He giggled to himself as they turned from grey to pink, and then red. If the scalding did not kill them before he ran out of boiling water, he dropped them in the bucket." (33)

Tehmul's banter causes irritation to those who are around him. His lack of ability to maintain secrets poses problems to all involved. Threatening him to silence is the only alternative left. A striking parallel can be traced between Steinbeck's Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and Mistry's Tehmul. Both Tehmul and Lennie gets into trouble because of their sexuality. The intense desire to touch and feel anything that looks soft makes him beg to touch Roshan's doll and later, leads to trouble with the prostitutes. The same can be traced in Lennie's nature too. His over cuddling of animals, results, in accidentally killing them, which foreshadow his murder of Curley's wife.

Both George and Gustad (protagonists of the novels) cater to the emotional needs of the Intellectually Disabled. In their journey of self-realization and survival, the latter becomes not a burden, but an essential means to refine their finer side of themselves. The heroes closure require a rite de passage through dire straits that leaves them more matured and uplifts their position in the eyes of the reader. At a pivotal point of the text, Gustad finds Roshan's missing doll at Tehmul's apartment, with a panting Tehmul in a compromising position. After rejection at the red zones, Tehmul's fantasy is lighted by the dainty British doll. His repeated 'GustadGustadGustad. Verysorry. Veryverysorry.' (303) is due to the fact that he has sunk in Gustad's eyes. Mistry's protagonist understands the need for the intellectually disabled to satisfy his body's urges. He is sympathetic in spite of the fact that it was his daughters first and only doll and Tehmul has desecrated it beyond repair. Hence as Tehmul sinks down the moral scale, Gustad rises up due to his benevolence.

Various social events marked a shifting attitude of the public against the intellectually disabled. Early 20th century society was charged with "delinquency, deviancy, prostitution, alcoholism, and pauperism, and blame for these ills was increasingly shifted to the feebleminded." (Yong, 50). Books like "*The Jukes*". *A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity* (1875) , *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the History of Feeble*

Mindedness (1912) worked against the Intellectually Disabled, portraying them as the root cause of all evils prevalent in the society. The overwhelming impact of this literature on the public, made more widespread impact than could have been intended. Amos Yong points out that, these literature,

“Confirmed the suspicions of the masses that innocent women had to be protected from feebleminded men, and feeble minded women needed to be protected from illicit sexual activity, and unwanted and unneeded pregnancies, that the feebleminded had more offspring on the average than the non-feeble minded, and that left unchecked, feeble mindedness would destroy civilized society.” (Yong, 50)

This was the dawn of the “Menace of the feebleminded” . Noll and Trent adds to the picture saying that as early as 1880, the feeble minded adult began to replace the feeble minded child in both professional and popular literature. (3) It was during this time that the word ‘feeblemindedness’ began to replace ‘idiocy’.

This subtle change carries massive subliminal messages. A child who can be trained, educated, pardoned at omissions, loved and cared for symbolizes promise at the end of a long journey. When this was replaced by ‘adults’ , the implication was that no longer could they be trained, or worse, no amount of training could do any help and that as flawed individuals, no omission could be entertained or pardoned. Hence, Mistry’s combination of violence and sexuality with the Intellectually Disabled cannot be overlooked as a random choice, but has deeper implications resonant to the familiar attitude of the time.

III. INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN SHAME

Rushdie’s *Shame*, has brought into Indian Fiction, theseething and unforgettable character of Sufiya Zinobia. Sufiya symbolizes dual subalternity- the subjugated Pakistani womanhood and the shame of being Intellectually Disabled. Unlike many writings where the subaltern succumbs to her surroundings, Rushdie’s heroine raises from her branded position with rage and transforms herself into the beast, unleashing back the fury that would previously have been suffered silently.

Whether Sufiya has mental deficiency or developmental deficiency as autism is not clear to the reader. Rushdie uses magical realism to transform Sufiya into a beast. Her sleepwalking into Pinkies yard in a trance and killing 218 turkeys by tearing off their heads and reaching down into their bodies to draw their guts up through their necks with “ tiny weaponless hands” (150) is not an impulsive act. The readers cannot read any rationality behind the acts of violence and the decapitating of heads become her signature style as it extends from animals to humans with high alacrity.

Parallely, Sufiya’s mind slows down and she remains a child forever. It is in her mind where she can enjoy, the “favourite things she keeps in there locked up. When people are present she never dares to take things out and play with them in case they get taken away or broken by mistake.” (224). Inside her head she not only conjures fictional images of happy times with her father hugging and smiling at her or of playing with her mother on a skipping rope. She fills her head with happy images, so that “there won’t be room for the other things, things she hates.” (225).

Conflicting notions of husband, children, duties of a wife that she has imbibed from others who come in contact with her (ayah, mother for example) confuse and torment her. As she tries to conjure up vague equations of social relationships within her head, her need for expressing her sexual desires take her into another dimension. The tug of war between responsibility and practical reality haunts her. What is surprising is Rushdie’s use of a disabled female body, its suppressed sexuality giving birth to a beast, so malicious that it indulges in the rape and decapitation of four adolescents. Involuntarily, Rushdie knits a tale from powerlessness to all consuming power, an animal like power that knows no fear. At the mental age of six and a half, when Sufiya is able to control herself, she is pushed into marriage saying “in many opinions brains are a positive disadvantage to a woman in marriage”. She understands that her life lacks certain things, though she is unable to explicitly pin point what. She is also able to understand the connection between her ayah and the growth in her tummy leading to her expulsion.

Rushdie’s use of the intellectually disabled body to represent shame of a whole society is well crafted in the text.

IV. INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN ANCIENT PROMISES

Literature, from Harper Lee’s Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mocking Bird* to Misra’s *Ancient Promises* has depicted mentally challenged in the 20th century. Lee’s Boo Radley had been prominent by his absence and materializes only in the fog end of the text. He is locked down under the basement and was imagined to be a fear

inducing cannibal, causing the children sleepless nights. With changes in the society, changes started appearing in the treatment of Intellectually Disabled and literature mirrored these changes. Riya's situation in *Ancient Promises* is a far cry from Radley's plight. Riya's mother is willing to put everything at stake and give her daughter a fair chance of survival. The sprouting facilities of educating the disabled, both physical and mentally handicapped are mentioned in the text. But the challenges of mainstreaming such a child still seemed impossible as ordinary schools do not have the man power or infra structure to cater to the growing needs of an intellectually disabled person. Riya's expulsion from the kindergarten of St Thomas school is a clear indicator.

Ancient Promises narrates a mother's world shattering down as she learns of her daughter's handicap. She looks at the new tag of "Deffinitely mentally Handicapped" which the famous pediatrician had given Riya, a "little wrist band, to carry with her through life." (128). Prominent among the questions she throws at herself is the thought of having done something to deserve the punishment. She asks, "Had I done anything that deserved such unending punishment? Why me? Why me? Why me?" (129) she also wonders if it a mother's guilt that leads to her daughter's mental retardation. This is a notion that is prominent in the symbolic paradigm of disability.

Riya changes Janaki's life. The desire to make Riya accepted in the family provides increasing pressure to the young mother till she realizes the futility of her attempt. The walls of prejudice that encircled her now encircled her daughter and there was no refuge outside it. This realization hardens her and strengthens her to become another person. "My own rights had not seemed worth fighting for, but Riya needed me to be her voice and a battle on her behalf would be far more satisfying." (133). Riya plays a crucial role in Janaki's transformation into a hardened mature person who unflinchingly tries to create a space for herself and her daughter in contrast with the earlier demure person who willingly let herself be pushed about. Yet what is strikingly visible is that, the character of Riya is not developed much by the writer apart from being a foil to the growth of Janaki.

V. AUTISM IN CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY

Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980) set in the post independent India, centers around Bimla, (Bim) who is the binding thread to the disintegrating family. Bim's life conjoins a vicious circle which she cannot break and hence after initial disapprovals, she reconciles to it. The text deals with the growth of three children into adulthood, Raja, Bimla, Tara and the stunned growth of their brother, Baba. Autistic Baba is not given any other name but merely referred to as 'baba' (baby) throughout the book. Baba is seen as a responsibility which the parents pass on to their children, which the married children pass on to the unmarried ones causing guilt to all family members. Tara feels persistent guilt of having abandoned Baba and Bim while searching for her own happiness.

Though Baba's dependence seems to be a constant event, he is never seen in the entire novel as a hassle they cannot manage. The siblings do not, at any point, condescendingly sympathize, nor is there any cribbing involved while looking after Baba. Desai's Baba falls amidst a family who delve out care to their autistic brother. Baba being handed over a brimming glass of milk, even when there is a scarcity of it in the other's cup, including that of the visiting brother- in- law itself is a reminder of the family's care towards their autistic sibling.

As pointed out very vividly by Cindy Lacom, Bim comes to recognize that "It was Baba's silence and reserve and otherworldliness that she had wanted to break open and ran-sack and rob" (164). And yet Baba himself-whose story is never told first-hand, whose motives and memories remain a blank in the sisters' efforts to reconstitute their pasts and thus their present-remains silent, a third space which is indeterminate and unrepresentable. He is that Stranger "whose language less presence evokes an archaic anxiety and aggressivity" by highlighting the opacity of language in a story where language is all (Bhabha, 166)

To give credit to Desai's narration, Baba is pictured as objectively as possible. His mannerisms, the constant sounds of the records running in his room, the sound of the pebbles clanging, are narrated in the matter of fact manner. Baba is a presence, a continuous presence Desai does not overlook throughout the course of the novel. Like a persistent theme he lingers at the backdrop, to the extent that even memories of the protagonists involve something or the other of Baba - if not his music, his silence.

VI. THE PARADIGM SHIFT

Though all the four novels are set in the post independent India, the progression from *Such a Long Journey* to *Clear Light of Day* shows a clear transformation in the perception and treatment of the Intellectually Disabled. The visible lack of tolerance in the former novels are replaced by sympathy (though, yet not empathy) in the latter ones. This paradigm shift in the treatment of the Intellectually Disabled from a menace to one who could be mainstreamed if given care, evolved with the changing governmental policies and inclusion of disability right laws.

Mirroring the west, India too started updating policies, ushering new and liberal policies. With Dr. B. Kuppuswamy as the President of All India Association on Mental Retardation, an All India Conference was held on Nov 26-27, 1966 at New Delhi. Another landmark in India's approach to solving problem of Mentally challenged children was the foundation of the first home for such by Bombay Children's Aid Society at Umerkhadi in 1941. Today, in lieu with the global scenario, The Ministry of Welfare has set up the National Council on Handicapped Welfare to frame policy guidelines for the country. To encourage more mentally challenged to be mainstreamed and brought into employment, National Awards for outstanding employers of persons with mental handicap are given. Travel concessions in Indian railways, children's educational Allowance, monthly allowance for central government employees having children with mental handicaps are given. Income tax concessions are also provided. Recently a scheme for providing Community Based rehabilitation Services (CBRS) for mentally handicapped from rural areas. Under Article 45 of Indian Constitution, the state should provide free and compulsory education for all children under the age of 14, which includes mentally challenged students too. National trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental retardation and Multiple Disability Act- Niramaya Scheme was instituted by the government of India which was revised in April 2015. The act has provisions for Legal guardianship of the four categories with disabilities and for creation of enabling environment for their as much independent living as possible.

VII. CONCLUSION

Writings on and about the intellectually disabled often confirms and conforms to the dominant cultural norms. As Thomas Couser points out, the "marked" (16) body always calls for an explanation, an answer to "what happened to you?". The writers attempt to pacify the curious reader by submerging the latter with details of the reason for disability- the cause of the person becoming intellectually disabled. The same can be found in Mistry's Tehmul and Rushdie's Sufiya. Explicit details are given about their birth and the slow revelation and understanding that the child is not normal. This has led to many studies which seek to answer the question if disability could generate a narrative. As Couser points out, while addressing the issue, what cannot be overlooked is the "ethical dilemma" (19) in representing an individual who cannot give consent to the authenticity of representation, nor is able to speak for himself. Attempts by others to speak for them entails misrepresentation.

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