

## The Other(ized) Side of Darkness: Locating the Nuances of Disability in Tagore's "Drishtidaan"

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### Abstract:

Tagore's early twentieth-century work, "Drishtidaan" (1898), from his short story collection *Golpo Guchcha* (1926) attempts to grapple with the issue of disability, as an interesting shift in focus, while recent postcolonial and postmodern discourses have emphasised marginalised aspects of existence such as the third world, queer communities, poverty, and tribal cultures. Tagore makes use of the narrative to locate "disability" in a manner similar to that of contemporary disability theorists, asserting that it exists at the point where individuals and socio-cultural surroundings interact. Irrespective of that radical reading, one might assess that by portraying Kumu, the blind protagonist, as an idealised representation of suffering femininity, Tagore, to some extent seems to be conforming to the historical tendency in literature to devalue individuals with "disabilities". Keeping that question in focus, this paper tries to look for the reason for this reductionist interpretation of the woman with "disability".

**Keywords:** Disability, Normalcy, Stigma, Impairment.

**Analysis:** Much prior to the emergence of postcolonial and postmodern concerns regarding the discourses of the marginalised, such as the impoverished, the disenfranchised, and the "third world," Rabindranath Tagore, during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, addressed the topic of "disability" in his work, *Drishtidaan*.<sup>1</sup> The blind protagonist, Kumu, takes the spotlight in her narrative of resistance against the repressive systems of both the patriarchy and the conventional society, which prioritises "ability" and conformity to social roles. The paper aims to question a myopic reading of the female "disabled" body or existence as being inefficient, unable, and reliant. Tagore's narrative text explores the location of "disability" at the point where individuals and their social and cultural surroundings collide. However, if Tagore's short story aims to expose the literary world's involvement in the historical marginalisation of those with "disabilities", it achieves this at the cost of Kumu as an idealised representation of feminine pain, albeit at a price.

"Drishtidaan", written in 1898, centres around Kumu, a typical Bengali girl who is married to Abinash, an ambitious doctor, at the young age of eight. At the age of fourteen, she becomes pregnant but unfortunately delivers a stillborn foetus. Accidents like these greatly affect Kumu, causing her to experience a range of physical discomforts including weakness, headaches, and impaired eyesight. The spouse, an ambitious and aspiring doctor, administers several medications to cure Kumu of her medical illnesses. The narrative effectively portrays the husband's initiative, eagerness, and confidence as a doctor while he seeks treatment for his wife as a patient. Abinash strongly opposes the involvement of Kumu's older brother in the situation and does not value his suggestion to seek outside assistance. Abinash has now recognised Kumu as his own possession. In the following sections, we see a glimpse of the moral predicament faced by Kumu as she grapples with the challenge of satisfying both her husband and her brother, who serve as symbolic protectors of her existence and are accountable for her well-being. Is it not a frequently cited verse, 'Her father safeguards her during her childhood, her spouse safeguards her during her youth, and her son safeguards her during her old age; a woman is never seen suitable for independence'<sup>2</sup>, that the laws of Manu prescribe for women? Contrary to the husband's policy and practice, the elder brother in the book fulfils this commitment and responds to Kumu's medical crisis instead of the father. Neither of the two proponents of patriarchy ever consider inquiring about Kumu's preferred approach of treatment. The situation deteriorates and the husband also recognises the necessity of seeking external medical assistance. As a result, a Caucasian doctor is summoned to actively halt the deterioration and quick fall of Kumu's visionary capacity. We may also dispute the author's design that necessitates the involvement of a European doctor, who possesses greater and advanced knowledge compared to all the "native" doctors. Subsequently, it becomes apparent that there is a necessity to perform surgery on Kumu's left eye. However, this procedure proves to be very demanding and finally results in the loss of vision in Kumu's eye. Richard Jenkins proposes one approach to understanding "disability" that involves considering three potential scenarios - (i) Impairment that occurred or was diagnosed at birth or during early childhood, (ii) Impairment resulting from subsequent illness or injury, and (iii) Impairment as a part of the natural ageing process.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding Kumu, it is evident that their blindness was neither hereditary, nor a result of the typical ageing process, but rather a result of an illness. Timely and effective intervention could have potentially cured this sickness. The husband, who saw himself as competent to handle his wife's medical issue, postponed any outside assistance. Kumu was digitally

transformed into a guinea pig, serving as a subject for the husband (symbolising patriarchy) to carry out several medical tests. The patriarchal system's aggression leads to the complete loss of sight for women who are obedient and subservient, causing them to suffer lifelong pain and irreparable damage. Tagore prohibits Kumu from ever questioning Abinash's proficiency as a doctor and does not permit her to criticise Abinash for inflicting her blindness. Instead, Kumu perceives her blindness as a manifestation of divine involvement in her fortunate and joyful marriage, maybe serving as retribution for transgressions made in her past life. Many people typically assume that "ability" is a positive attribute, while "disability" is seen as a negative condition, maybe interpreted as a divine punishment or retribution for one's sins. In Upagupta, another work by Tagore, there is an assumption that emerges. It portrays a dancing girl who, having previously enjoyed her youth and beauty, eventually succumbs to the "black pestilence", with her body covered in smallpox blisters. Her transgression, akin to Prakriti's in *Chandalika*, involved an endeavour to entice a Bhikshu away from his state of renunciation and into the realm of carnal cravings and longing. The smallpox, in this case, serves as a retribution for the offence committed, resulting in the complete isolation and rejection of the individual by society. She was swiftly relocated from the town to prevent the spread of her toxic infection:

"What woman lay in the shadow of the wall at his feet, struck with the black pestilence, her body spotted with sores, hurriedly driven away from the town?"<sup>4</sup>

She faces the fate of offenders, of sinners, guilty of moral and sexual misdemeanours. Here lies the destiny of wrongdoers, individuals who have committed transgressions of both moral and sexual kind. In Western literature, a prominent illustration of this phenomenon is seen in the character of Oedipus. Unbeknownst to him, he engages in sexual relations with his own mother and commits the heinous act of killing his own father, both of which are considered the most severe cultural taboos. As a consequence, Oedipus inflicts the harshest punishment upon himself by blinding his own eyes and withdrawing from human society, ultimately exiling himself. In the same vein, Kumu held the belief that her abstaining from food and her strong commitment to religious practices had resulted in her being blessed with a husband like Abinash. However, she also believed that her past life's wrongdoings had played a role in her losing him. This loss first manifested as her inability to see him, and later as a growing physical and emotional distance between them, caused by the complicated circumstances they found themselves in. Throughout the narrative, Kumu is portrayed as an exemplary Indian lady who remains loyal to her husband, even if it means sacrificing one of her essential bodily functions. She aligns herself with someone like Labonyo, her neighbour in Calcutta, who is inclined to challenge the husband's unquestionable knowledge and authority. Kumu attributes this characteristic of Labonyo to the pernicious impact of the metropolis of Kolkata, which withers the human heart, depriving it of the sustenance of compassion, comprehension, and empathy. The contemporary urban environment, with its reliance on technology and machinery, has a detrimental influence on the moral qualities of individuals.

Kumu's primary preoccupation, following the loss of her vision, revolves around her limited existence and her incapacity to fulfil the role of an ideal wife to Abinash, tending to his well-being and household. Manu prescribes the customary expectation for an Indian wife to be occupied with domestic chores: "Let the (husband) employ his (wife) in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in keeping (everything) clean, in (the fulfilment of) religious duties, in the preparation of his food and in looking after the household utensils."<sup>5</sup> Kumu, who is now blind, becomes aware of her own insufficiency as merely being Abinash's wife and housekeeper, and she is deeply upset by this transformation. The United Nations offers a comprehensive explanation of the meanings and differences between "impairment", "disability", and "handicap":

Impairment: Any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.  
Disability: Any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.

Handicap: A disadvantage for a given individual resulting from an impairment or disability, that limit or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal, depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors for that individual.<sup>6</sup>

Handicap is thus determined by the interaction between those who are "disabled" and their surroundings. Kumu faces not only impairment, but also disability and handicap. Her blindness is the impairment that ultimately limits her ability to function as a typical sighted Hindu wife. This puts her at a disadvantage and prevents her from fulfilling the societal role of a wife and mother. Due to Kumu's blindness, she is unable to function and Abinash is now responsible for managing the family and caring for his blind wife. Tagore's protagonist in his work internalises the societal norms associated with being a Hindu wife. This includes controlling the private sphere, being physically capable, and possessing the required wisdom, economic understanding, morality, and virtue to take on the burden of administering the husband's family. Disability theorists contend that in an optimal scenario, there should be no instances of discrimination against those with disabilities, and they should not be excluded from mainstream society or considered outside the bounds of what is considered "normal" - "Although persons with disabilities have a legal right to live in the least restrictive environments and with non disabled persons on an equal basis, such interactions are hardly equal."<sup>7</sup>

Kumu's physical constraint is intensified by her keen perception of the societal bias against her "disabled" state of being. As a result of her dissatisfaction, she suggests that Abinash enter into a second marriage, which represents the ultimate act of sacrifice by the remorseful Hindu woman. In another one of Tagore's short stories, named "Subha," the husband of a deaf girl proceeds to get into a second marriage with a girl who is physically "normal" in all aspects. In the context of "Drishtidaan", Abinash initially declines Kumu's proposal, but later his paternal aunt supports the idea of a marriage between the doctor and her niece Hemangini. Tagore differentiates between Kumu and Hemangini by analysing the connotative significance of their names. Hemangini, who would serve as a contrast to the "disabled" and flawed Kumu; Hemangini possesses a flawless figure, is young, sexually attractive, virgin, making her enticing to the successful and sexually potent Abinash. Hemangini is a feasible substitute for the impaired Kumu as- "For the Indian Patriarchy; the woman is a sexual resource, a compilation of a womb, breasts and vagina for its use. She is a negotiable, marketable commodity."<sup>8</sup> Abinash, a wealthy physician in the rural town of Hashimpur, attempts to win over Hemangini's affection and attention by gifting her a showy pearl ring. However, this action causes Kumu, who deeply cares for Abinash and his family, to feel disregarded and unloved.

At the time that the proposal for an alliance with Hemangini was made, Kumu had already overcome her physical "disability" and had resumed the competent management of the home. When Kumu lost her vision, she relied on her remaining four senses to enhance her effectiveness as a wife and household manager. The capacity to adapt to the decline in physical abilities contradicts societal expectations of individuals with disabilities. In mainstream society, those with disabilities are often marginalised and labelled as useless. However, "characterising persons with disabilities as burdens is not only inaccurate but perpetuates negativistic and paternalistic attitudes which become obstacles to disabled persons striving for more normal, productive, and satisfying lives."<sup>9</sup>

Although Kumu has regained authority over the family, what confounds the readers is her failure to discharge a fundamental duty of married women in Hindu society: she is unable to conceive and bear children once more. In his book "Intimate Relations," Sudhir Kakar, a renowned psychoanalyst and academic scholar, provides evidence of the prevalence of proverbs that extol the virtues of women<sup>10</sup> in languages spoken in the North Eastern region of India, such as Assamese and Bengali. These proverbs consistently and unsurprisingly emphasise and celebrate the maternal function of spouses. "Who could belittle women? Women who bear children!"<sup>11</sup> It is "stated concisely in the Smritis (the Law codes), elaborated in the Puranas (which are not only collections of myths but also contain chapters on the correct conduct of daily life), modified for local usage by the various kind of religiosi."<sup>12</sup> The literature of the patriarchy stresses exclusively on the role of the wife towards the husband, to beget an heir, preferably a male one.

How can we, as readers, come to terms with this evident aspect of Kumu's life, apart from his blindness? Tagore is not attributing infertility and blindness to Kumu, as the underlying cause of Kumu's physical condition was the delivery of a stillborn foetus. What we observe is the complete absence of any sexual consciousness or sexual attraction between the husband and wife after the "impairment". Abinash engages in extramarital pleasures, being particularly attracted to the youthful and beautiful Hemangini. However, he neglects his responsibilities towards his own wife. How can he abstain from exerting his patriarchal authority over his wife? Since the Vedic Age (3000 BC to 500 BC), there has been a strong focus on maximising the utilisation of the wife's ability to reproduce. To enable the full utilization of the woman's fertile periods, one of "the Vedic rule[s] for matrimony contended that a girl was to be married off soon after her first period, and it was established that wasted fertile periods would accrue as a sin upon the father who did not follow this role."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in order to free himself from this wrongdoing, the father of the deaf girl in Subha resorts to deceit in order to arrange her marriage with a family residing in a distant city, far away from their original hamlet of Chandipur. Thus, it is peculiar that Abinash appears to make no effort to obtain an offspring from Kumu. Although Kumu once expressed a wish to retreat from worldly affairs and lead a secluded and devoted existence, this phase was short-lived and she soon returned to her usual home lifestyle. Can we infer that her blindness played a role in the desexualization of her relationship with Abinash? Does her imperfection condemn her to a life of sexual deprivation? She may have yearned for a profound and satisfying connection with Abinash, desiring intimacy with him despite her visual impairment. The loss of her vision does not result in the loss of her subjectivity, appetite, wants, and dreams. Her innate desires are not diminished by her loss of vision. We observe the detrimental impact on Kumu's sense of self due to the apathy and lack of empathy from society towards her needs. Focusing on disability, Anthony Synnott, has opined how "the body is also, and primarily, the self. We are all embodied."<sup>14</sup>

And embodiment refers to the actual experience of the sensual and bodily subjectivity. Despite Kumu's blindness, she nevertheless possesses a subjective body that her spouse disregards and fails to fully understand. Both Kumu and Hemangini are deprived of personality and turned to simple objects of male desire, not just Kumu. Her willingness to marry Abhinash is never inquired about. We perceive the status of women, regardless of their ability or disability, as that of insignificance:

As a non-entity, the idea of woman's choice- her choice of life, love and dignity- cannot be entertained. Choice is the patriarchy's prerogative, its tool of supremacy, and a woman's very existence hinges on the wielding of that choice by men.<sup>15</sup>

Tagore empowers Hemangini in such a way that he does not empower Kumu. Hemangini expresses a symbolic rejection of Abinash and his desire by aggressively discarding the pearl ring. However, Kumu does not exhibit any symbolic gesture of rejecting Abinash and his representative structures over the narrative. Despite experiencing sexual deprivation, Kumu does not exhibit rebellious behaviour like Damini from *Chaturanga* (Four Aspects), who is consumed by intense physical urges. Kumu's repressed cravings do not propel her into a dangerous behavioural pattern, as she is deeply infatuated with Abinash. Tagore may have refrained from attributing sexual autonomy to Kumu due to societal norms that discourage female sexuality, even within the context of marriage. Alternatively, it could be a consequence of cultural beliefs that devalue the sexual desires of those with disabilities. Regardless of the causes and justifications, Tagore portrays Kumu as an exemplary lady who is deeply religious and dedicated. She is able to navigate through societal norms and patriarchy without harbouring any resentment or ill will.

Women were supposed to be "docile, beautiful...and cheerful at all times. They also had to possess the ability to create for their husbands a perpetually stress-free environment."<sup>16</sup> Kumu's endeavours to maintain her dignity are hindered by the able-bodied individuals in her vicinity. The lady is deprived of the joy of being loved by her husband, who employs deceit, falsehoods, and cunning to deceive her and get another wife. She is also deprived of the joys of parenting.

Tagore allows Kumu to recount her narrative, but fails to imbue her character with the authentic encounters of "disability". Tagore does not attribute negative or malevolent attributes to Kumu, as is typically associated with individuals who are "disabled". Instead, he venerates her, elevates her to a position of great admiration, and separates her from the realm of everyday existence. Abinash's character has a profound shift, transitioning from a morally upright and diligent doctor to a morally questionable and money-oriented individual. On the other hand, Kumu maintains her strong moral compass throughout the text. As a dutiful spouse, she endeavours to mediate on Abinash's behalf with God and other individuals in order to protect him from both divine and human curses. Her exemplary behaviour and moral standards create even more distance between her and Abinash, making it challenging for him to love and care for her as he would a typical human. Tagore may be doing significant harm onto Kumu by repeatedly marginalising her. Firstly, as a woman in a culture dominated by men; secondly, as a "disabled" being in a society that values physical ability; and thirdly, as a pure and untainted human in a world characterised by corruption and materialism. Kumu is distinguished from the remainder of her civilization. Fiction is perpetuating and reinforcing Kumu's marginalised existence. If we accept the fact about the relevance and importance of literature in human society, we realise how literature "can have both preparatory and sustaining functions in the process of providing knowledge and altering attitudes towards the handicapped."<sup>17</sup> Tagore's actions, rather than empowering individuals with disabilities, are actually reinforcing certain stereotypes that align with the functioning of patriarchy and mainstream society.

In "Drishtidaan", Tagore employs a literary device that had previously been utilised in Western works as well. In Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, a crippled Tiny Tim "is the symbol of innocence and hope who finally makes Scrooge mend his ways."<sup>18</sup> In this narrative, the blind Kumu bestows onto Abinash the ability to perceive the genuine significance of a committed spouse and the sacredness of the institution of marriage. In Tagore's concept, Kumu serves as a catalyst for Abinash's development. The play *The King of the Dark Chamber* by Tagore explores the concept of transcending cultural bias and overcoming external flaws by embracing the power of love from within. Though the king is not affected with any physical limitation, he is "ugly" and therefore repulsive to the Queen -

Black, black-oh, thou art Black like the everlasting night! I only looked on thee for one dreadful instant. The blaze of the fire fell on your features - you looked like the awful night when a comet swings fearfully into our ken - Oh then I closed my eyes - I could not look on you any more.<sup>19</sup>

King Surangama can only face Queen Sudarshana within a perpetually unlit room, as if to establish an environment where the balance of power between the "attractive" and the "unattractive" is maintained. Can a culture that values physical attractiveness and abilities, recognise the value of individuals with disabilities, when it seems to disregard those who are considered unattractive? The "disabled" class receives the most attention as a group that is considered unattractive and so doubly repellent.

## Conclusion:

Tagore's short stories, "Drishtidaan" and "Shubha", depict "disability" as a consequence of the sins committed in the victim's past life. "Disability" is not regarded as a simple deviation, or the consequence of an incident or as a component of the "typical" ageing procedure. The sinner experiences God's wrath as a punishment, a means of discipline, and a tool for moral guidance. Does Tagore, however, fail to challenge the stereotyped and established perception of "disability"? Doesn't he primarily subject Kumu to a life of anguish, torment, and isolation, where he is scorned and ridiculed by the majority of society? Furthermore, if ultimately there is the prospect of reunion and happiness, why is it facilitated by the

solitary anguish and self-punishment of Kumu? Why is there a lack of genuine portrayal of Kumu's challenges in dealing with her blindness, a distorted perception of reality, and the experience of living with her own body?

**END NOTES:**

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