

Blindness; Seeing the Unseen. A Feminist Disability Study of The Other Senses and Vision

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“We tell stories of the eyes every day, for example. They are symbolic of intelligence, allowing us to see the point; intimacy, love at first sight; spirituality, eyes as the windows to the soul; authority and power, I can see right through you; in Western culture of truth and honesty, look me in the eye; and of ability, I can see that. It is not difficult to imagine everyday stories and thus everyday practices that reflect such symbolic meaning.” (Healey 3)

This paper attempts to examine the nuances related to the experiences of disabled women. Studying cultural and literary texts under the rubric of Feminist Disability Studies would radically alter our perspective of how ableism and patriarchy intersect with the lives of disabled women. Feminist disability studies have provided new avenues for revisiting the representation and experience of disabled women in literature. As envisioned by Rosemarie Garland Thomas, taking recourse to disability studies and feminism can provide the most apt critique of myriad ways in which disabled women are marginalised. “Within feminist disability studies, exploring conceptual and lived connections between gender and disability helps to make visible the historical and ongoing interrelationship between all forms of oppression.” (Hall 4) This paper will study to illustrate how the onset of disability in the protagonists in *The Other Senses* (2012) by Preeti Monga and *Vision* (1916) by Rabindranath Tagore disintegrates/destabilises relationships within the family. It would also reveal the ableist bias and oppression in their lives. Both disabled women characters in their marital relationships come across the worst form of abuse. These texts accentuate different layers of normative ideologies that have a bearing on disabled women’s experiences. Both the writers have been selected from diverse backgrounds considering that India is composed of rich tapestry of cultures.

Key Words: Disability, Disabled Women, oppression, ableism, blindness

The representation of blindness in literature is an antique. It has historically received a very minimal critical interest and escaped from mainstream critical interrogation. Hence, it entails timely examination here. Revisiting Canon, the first major portrayal that springs out is the character of blind Tiresias in *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC). He is believed to have experienced life both as a male and a female with blindness. Contrary to his disability, his blindness contributes to bestowing him with the powers of clairvoyance. On the flip side, Oedipus disables himself by gouging out his eyes, as punishment for Sexual perversion in the Thebes. The other notable example includes Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (1608). It depicts Gloucester, blinded by Lear’s daughter Regan and his son, Edmund for helping Lear’s escape. Herbert George Wells in *Country of the Blind* (1904) imagines a mysterious valley inhabited by blind people, cut off from the rest of the world. Nunez, who acts as a guide for tourists, falls from a mountain and is stuck there. He takes this as an opportunity to rule them. But, in a world where there is no concept of sight, his sight is seen as a factor in his delusional perspective of the world. Hence, when examined by an elder a doctor among the natives, he recommends to removing his eyes. However, none of these works contributes to the intersection of gender and disability. Blindness at metaphorical level, could illustrate how societies are blinded by negative attitudes and stereotypes related to disability (blindness) and how in actual life they deal with it. Disability and femininity are both perceived in the same light. Both concepts are linked to subaltern positions in a hierarchical power structure. The subjectivity of disabled people is often defined against the norm that prevails at a particular time. Women with disabilities are doubly divested of their powers. These concomitant pressures tell upon their mental health. Thomson asserts that “We need to study disability in a feminist context to direct our highly honed critical skills toward the dual scholarly tasks of unmasking and reimagining disability, not only for people with disabilities, but for everyone.” (16) In a similar vein Simi Linton espouses for studying disability as “a prism through which one can gain a broader understanding of society and human experience”. (118) Such a critical and nuanced reading aimed at the examination of the social experience of women with disabilities would help to locate the links between different oppressive systems. Thompson further adds that disabled people along with other marginalized identities are subjected to different types of oppression such as “coercive rehabilitation, domestic violence, genocide, normalizing surgical procedures”, etc. “All of these discriminatory practices are legitimated by systems of representation, by collective cultural stories that shape the material world, underwrite exclusionary attitudes, inform human relations, and mould our senses of who we are.” (21) Blindness acts as a metaphor in the selected texts to illustrate ways by which disabled people are castigated, shamed, ostracized and abused. However, it also emphasizes how these characters do not slump down, as they compensate for this loss, by utilising the other four senses. Both Kumo and Preeti have to face the worst of social discrimination and

challenges. Indian societies are conservative, and women's roles are defined within the home. Getting disabled in such a society can bring numerous obstacles. Which eventually leads to double discrimination against disabled girls. Both of the protagonists Kumo and Monga acquired vision loss. Kumo's vision dwindled after she gave birth to a dead baby. in case of later, it was brought on by the response to the polio vaccination given at school. Both of them encounter rejection, shame and denial of choices in an extremely rigid society. Where women's fate has not changed much. Leaving them vulnerable to depression and other anxiety disorders. However, the tenacity shown by Monga is clearly visible as she takes societal discrimination head-on. She is born in a more privileged household, having access to education. Which in the case of Kumo was lacking. She has limited choices but to submit to fate.

After giving birth to a dead baby, Kumo's vision dwindled, and it further deteriorated as her husband, a medical student himself was obstinate to treat her by himself. Which ultimately causes a verbal spat between her husband and her brother, who out of love wants her to be treated by a full-fledged doctor. He without informing Abinash, brings a doctor to examine Kumo's eyes and subsequently sends medicine to her. Kumo finds herself in a quagmire. "All women, whether disabled or nondisabled, have vulnerabilities that can be used as avenues for the exertion of power and control; disability serves as an additional vulnerability factor." (Nosek et al. 186)

Women have been traditionally conceived as weak and powerless. For men, the disabled women whose fragility is further augmented by their double marginal position become a site where they can exert their full dominance. The rift between her husband and brother is resurfacing of cultural representation of male as a protector and female as a symbol of weakness. She says "while they were quarrelling. I was saying to myself that it was always the poor grass that suffered the most when two kings went to war. There was a dispute going on between these two, and I had to bear the brunt of it." Kumo is plagued by the guilt that her impairment has enabled her a useless non-functional object that can be of no value to her husband. She acts scrupulously to subdue both her male well-wishers by telling lies, she says "Oh! what lies we women have to tell! When we are mothers, we tell lies to pacify our children; and when we are wives, we tell lies to pacify the fathers of our children. We are never free from this necessity." But her efforts go in vain, as the sudden visit of her husband's aunt spoils the much-pacified atmosphere. As she drops the idea of a second marriage in her husband's ears, she also suggests that a there is girl in her relation who could prove to be an ideal wife for him. It's not only her husband who shows the internalization of ableism, its striking example is reflected, in her husband's aunt, who sees her disability as causing dewomanization, Desexualization of her being.

Kumo is also aghast at the sudden strange change that has struck in the behaviour of her husband. billing impoverished patients exorbitant amounts. Since he commenced practicing medicine, his greed for materialistic pursuits knew no bounds. Greed towards money being a cardinal sin, may also allude to a metaphorical blindness of her husband, who once shared the concerns of poor patients when he was studying, However, since he assumes power as an authoritative physician greed renders him metaphorically blind. He least examined the disease but in poor patients, he saw in them a profit that could satiate his unending materialistic and capitalistic desire. It raises questions over ethics of medical practice that is more concerned with material value rather than finding a cure. On the flip side of it, Kumo who had gone blind was able to notice this subtle change in him of which he was ignorant of. Blindness in case the of Kumo here empowers her other senses, while greed for riches in her husband's case seems to have warped his senses to discern moral and ethical values. Which are attached to his role as a physician.

Kumo suffered the most lethal blow, when suddenly her husband on the pretext of some work, wanted to take off for a few days. Kumo, who had become more perceptive since she got blind, she promptly smelled a rat here. When she inquired from him about the reason for his sudden departure. His reply, confirmed her suspicion true, as he was leaving to find a bride for marriage. "My husband said slowly: "I will tell you the truth. I am afraid of you. Your blindness has enclosed you in its fortress, and I have now no entrance. To me you are no longer a woman. You are awful as my God. I cannot live my everyday life with you. I want a woman—just an ordinary woman—whom I can be free to chide and coax and pet and scold." She could not bear these apathetic and ridiculous words that ripped her apart inside from such a man, she adored as God. Disability in Kumo seems to have caused erasure of her womanhood and dehumanised her. Nandini Ghosh discussing the formation of gender and feminine roles in Bengal asserts" As women's primary roles are of wife and mother, they have to be capable of doing household work. Women have the responsibility of maintaining the Sansar once they grow up. In such a cultural context, the onset of disability is seen as a catastrophe for the young daughter who becomes flawed and physically less capable than other girls." (205) For Abinash The blind Kumo could no longer keep up with that unimpaired self as the norm for women, before her vision impairment. Her blindness had deprived her of the status of a normal woman capable of engaging in societal gender roles. Renu Addlakha articulates ". . . since women with disability do not look like normal women and their bodies do not function like normal bodies in some respects, they cannot take on the role of normal women and hence are less than women." (224) Kumo's blindness, in a society that is obsessed with the normality of bodies, renders her genderless. She becomes a woman who can't take up the role of a mother and housewife.

For Kumo, the pain of getting blind was lesser as compared to the emotional void that it created. She says, "the physical separation caused by blindness is the merest physical trifle. But, ah! It suffocates me to find that he is no longer with me." finding herself helpless against fate. She invokes God and laments how she always has been loyal and caring to her

Husband. Conversely, he has been hiding his evil desires to marry a second time, she says “Hitherto there had been only the one barrier of blindness. Now another was created—this deliberate silence about Hemangini. He feigned utter indifference. But I knew he was having letters about her.” This deadening and deliberate silence speaks so much about Abinash, it exposes the demonic persona that he has been hiding so far. Asch and Fine believe “If men and women with disabilities suffered social isolation or discovered that former friends no longer had time for them, perhaps the problem was not in their psychology but in others' attitudes toward disability and expectations of friendship.” (5)

Caught in thoughts about his infidelity and her future, she faints. The events take a sharp turn when she comes back to consciousness in the lap of Hemangi, who has now married his brother. For Kumo it's nothing less than a divine intervention that salvages her marriage to Abinash, who comes back home as a changed man.

The Other Senses is a memoir that narrates the story of Preeti Monga, who was born in a Sikh family to Charanjeet and Mohini. She is afflicted with vision impairment. When a polio shot was administered to her in a school, it caused a reaction and subsequently rendered her blind, and blindness heralds so many hindrances in her life. For Monga there were very few schools that catered to the disabled children. They too were in shambles. She in order to compete with her able-bodied male peers is enrolled in a normal school. Her mother takes it upon herself to provide her with the best education so that she may not trail behind. But her happy sojourn is sporadically filled with agony. As the teachers unconcerned by her disability, begin to castigate her for trivial matters in the school. These ableist and exclusive instances do not deter her from her track. But leave an indelible scar on her psyche.

For her, the real test lies ahead. Her disability causes her to face multiple rejections from suitors. Discrimination is also something she encounters in the workplace. When, unexpectedly, she is hired by a Five Star hotel, her happiness knows no bounds. But other employees are reticent to accept her into their ranks and protest to work with her, when they perceive that she is blind. Disabled women are more disadvantaged than women without disabilities. Their socio-economic position is the most volatile. The reasons could be a lack of opportunities and discriminatory attitudes in working culture. Normal-bodied people look down upon disabled people. “Both older women and women with disabilities are subject to violence. Women with disabilities are at least two to three times more likely than other women to experience violence.” (UN Women, Gender, Age and Disability: Addressing the Intersection) Gender and disability oppression can lead to a vicious cycle of violence that can include spousal abuse, treatment denial, care denial, and lack of financial assistance. The effects of the two marginalities are amplified by one another. Monga marries Keith, a swindler, who makes her suffer and subjects her relentlessly to domestic abuse. Monga narrates, “He kicked my head with his leg, flung Fiona on to the bed, and grabbed me by my nightdress and half pushing, half dragging me, he flung me out of the door of the apartment. Barefoot, clad only in a cotton nightdress, I landed stunned and horrified on the ice-cold cement staircase in the middle of the night. With lightning speed, he slammed the door shut upon me and locked it from inside. (131) The abusive relationship she was in caused her mental breakdown, which led to a failed attempt at suicide by trying to jump off the second-floor balcony. The unabating violent atmosphere at home profoundly affected her children and parents. The children are traumatized by the outrageous behaviour of their father. “With regard to social relationships, compared with disabled and nondisabled men and nondisabled women,” women with impairment “are more likely to remain single and, of those who marry, more likely to be divorced or separated. Similarly, women with disabilities are less likely to have children and to have significant relationships.” (Encyclopedie Disability Studies 763)

the magnitude of problems faced by disabled women is always more intense and complex that may come from family and society. Monga says, “I was both mentally and physically weak and vulnerable, abused and taunted by my husband, and in addition, completely helpless, dependent, and disabled.” And she is continuously nagged by questions such as “How would I look after my children? Where would the money come from?” (111) Though feminism has progressed the rights of women, disabled women have been rendered voiceless. They have been left behind. they are least educated and have their social and sexual rights denied. “. . . women with disabilities are at increased risk for poor health and social outcomes that go beyond placing them in “double jeopardy” as a result of sexism and disability bias.” (Encyclopedia of Disability Studies 761) The ideal physic is the norm for women, as it enhances beauty. The appearance of disability: scars, blindness, obesity and unusual size of body becomes a sight of repulsion, shame and unwontedness in Indian society that values aesthetics of the body. It can partly be attributed to the idealisation of female body parts. it eventually cast shadows on the marriage of disabled girls that otherwise would have provided an option of economic sustainability.

However, if a disabled girl is married or a married woman gets disabled. They are caught between a rock and a hard place. Their disability is often rebuked, taunted even in minor and trifle conflicts in relationships, Monga very often finds herself face to face with such abusive and derogatory remarks, she says, “Till the time I married him, I had never felt I was blind, but now my blindness was often rubbed into me as often as was possible: ‘Hey you blind bat. . . .’” and was reminded “You should thank your stars that I married you. . . .”(105) the consistent remainder of Monga's disability by Keith is used as a pretext to assault her physically. It also connotes the undertones that disabled women deserve disabled men and could not be taken as wives by an abled-bodied male.

According to Hiba Hagrass, men and women are viewed differently in society, with males being expected to be strong, capable of earning a living, and able to support their families. Regardless of the nature of their impairment, many disabled men might be said to fulfil their description. A woman is assessed using an entirely different set of criteria. She doesn't

have to be intelligent. This can even be a liability. She should be "beautiful" and appealing, an excellent housekeeper who can abide by her husband's demands, especially the physical ones. In any event, a crippled lady cannot be considered lovely when measured by our standards of beauty. Furthermore, a crippled lady can't possibly be alluring to men! After that, is there anything further on the list of requirements? (Abu Lina 18)

The Other Senses addresses diverse issues and undermines the medical and normative perspectives on disability, these perspectives see disability as an individual defect and dependence. It embodies the critique of social and cultural institutions that exclude and stigmatise disabled female anomalies. It puts forth the narrative of independence and creativity that undermines the trope of the disabled being dependent on others.

India societies being tradition-bound, the birth of a baby boy is celebrated with much fervour and preferred over a girl. On the flip side, the birth of a daughter renders an atmosphere of unpleasantness, stigma and familial conflicts. Monga narrates, "I was most fortunately my parent's adored first-born, even though a girl child. I say this because even today, in our part of the world, a boy child is much more preferred option." (9) The same bias is reflected in work place culture and other social institutions. The role expectations informed by patriarchal systems are internalized by common people and expressed through social relations. Mohini who is expecting her second child, is blessed by a lady who mops their home "May God give you a boy, my dear!" (12) This does not sit well with Monga, the words irked her because she feared the violent nature of boys.

Monga had two children in marriage with Keith which undermines the myth of disabled women not capable of reproduction, it also dismantles the stereotypes that the disabled themselves require a cure and hence cannot take the role of mothering. Yet, it cannot write off the domestic abuse and varied forms of oppression disabled women come across in their daily lives. However, what makes Monga Memoir an extraordinary and inspiring tale, is her decision-making and her strong resilience to fight back against dual discriminatory institutions of patriarchy and ableism which she faced in its worst and most severe form. She girds up to divorce Keith and explores the different avenues to end her economic dependence on her parents. It begins with working in a sales company to open her own new company. She also joined disability organisation to work under an umbrella organisation for their collective betterment.

What is common to both of the stories are the tendencies of ableist and patriarchal strictures to oppress. Which operate tacitly in the selected texts to render these disabled women helpless, subject them to domestic abuse and deprive them of their ability to take their decisions. The disabled women are devalued and divested of the standards of beauty. There are numerous such harrowing experiences shared in these two texts. They also illustrate the social exclusion and attitudinal barriers that are cast in their way. *The Other Senses* also highlights how education and skill could go in longer way in making disabled women to stand on their feet and resist such pressures. It also cognises them of their rights and instils a spirit of independence. Kumo's story exposes the myth of everlasting bonding of Couples as avowed in Hindu marriage ceremony as Saath Janam Ka Saath in the face of adversity(disability). It also leaves bare the patriarchal value system. That is employed to subjugate women The stories also undermine and deconstruct some of the common myths that have penetrated cultures to relegate and sequester disabled women, which in turn also rationalises this oppression. People with intersecting identities are more prone to double oppression. This could be because of double marginalities that they possess.

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