



DISABILITY, INTERSECTIONALITY AND IDENTITY: ONE LITTLE FINGER BY MALINI CHIB AND FLIGHT WITHOUT SIGHT BY PREETI MONGA

Purna Chandra Haldar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kalyani Mahavidyalaya

ABSTRACT

The Concept of the terms, 'ability' and 'disability' stands on a controversial ground since time immemorial. Human beings with different physical characteristics have been recognized with different identities or names as 'abled', 'disabled', 'deformed', 'impaired', 'abnormal', 'para-normal', 'eunuch', 'queer', 'crip', 'dwarf', and transgender', and more derogatively as 'handicapped'. Persons with any kind of physical or mental impairment are instantly identified as different and relegated from all privileges. It is a social as well as psychological notion that discriminate those people with impairments and are identified differently, and mere rights of living as human being are deprived. Towards the end of the 20th century, disability studies occupy a vibrant place in literary discourse that not only presents the deplorable conditions of the disabled but boldly asserts their 'ableism within their disability' and voices against the traditional negative attitude. In recent times, disability studies have entered and challenged against ableism. The present paper tends to explore the fights against disability through Intersectionality and securing identity in stereotypical society as reflected in the autobiographical stores of *One Little Finger* by Malini Chib and *Flight without Sight* by Preeti Monga, both the figures challenge against stigma of disability and challenge the social norms.

KEY WORDS: Ability, Disability, Crip, Transgender, Intersectionality, Ableism, Stereotypical.

INTRODUCTION

According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, 'disability is defined as 'a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions'. Disability is defined as "Disability is an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. It results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition and barriers in their environment" (WHO). Disability exclusion is not a present societal malady; it dates back to the history of human evolution. Since the days of The Mahabharata or prior to that, the social discrimination of people on the parameters on physical traits or mental retard is innumerable. The terms, 'abled', 'disabled', 'crippled', 'abnormal', 'impaired' 'eunuch', 'handicapped', all are the products of social cultures that results in the exclusion and quarantine of a class of people with their physical differences. Question of ability and disability remain ambiguous till date. In Greek Mythology, Tiresias is blind and is rebuked by Oedipus. In The Mahabharata, the actual heir to the throne of Kuru Dynasty was Dhritarastra but initially he was deprived of ruling his kingdom due to his blindness and instead Pandu was enthroned to Hastinapur. In The Ramayana, the Character of Manthara is assigned a negative role.

Jenny Morris in his quintessential book, *Pride Against Prejudice* explores in detail how disabled people experienced prejudice and how ideas and perceptions of disability are to a great extent

defined by the non-disabled world. The devaluing attitude of the non-disabled towards the disabled affects the psychological balance of the disabled persons. Morris states,

"We need to value our lives, and we also must value the lives of other disabled people and refuse to make assumptions about the quality of life based on the nature of a particular disability" (Morris 59).

The notional attitude towards the persons with disability is negative in time immemorial. They are supposed to be incapable of doing any work and are thought as a product of divine curse. They are assumed as burden and are set aside from the main stream of the society- culturally, educationally, politically and economically. The gender identity of the persons with disabilities is negligible and they are treated repugnantly.

Disability studies have secured a vibrant place towards the end of the last century. Disabled people's movement towards the end of the 20th century and the contributions of the social activists and scholars draws attention and gradually disability studies take vibrant shape. Recently, some autobiographies of the disabled start focusing on the issue of the disabled demonstrating their struggles and by intersecting, they establish their identities despite their physical deformities.

Disabled women of this era also contended that disabled people could not be considered as a whole since the issues faced by disabled women were often different faced by disabled men. Feminism challenges the idea and deconstructs the ableism by



arguing that the inability to include disabled women's concerns was not due to some unexplainable lack of awareness about the existence of disability but was mostly due to common misconceptions, stereotypes and what would later be termed ableist ideas about disabled people in general. The concept of perceptual disability is well illustrated:

"The popular view of women with disability has been one mixed with repugnance. Perceiving disabled women as childlike, helpless, and victimized, non-disabled feminists have severed them from the sisterhood in an effort to advance more powerful, competent, and appealing female icons. As one feminist academic said to the non-disabled co-author of this essay: 'Why study with disabilities? They reinforce traditional stereotypes of women being dependent, passive and needy.'" (Asch and Fine 1988:3-4)

Thematic Discussion on One Little Finger and Flight without Sight

Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* is a powerful autobiographical account of her life with cerebral palsy, highlighting her struggles and triumphs as a disabled woman in India. Through the lens of intersectionality, the book explores how disability interacts with other social identities such as gender, class, and cultural expectations, shaping her lived experience.

The story of *One Little Finger* by Malini Chib is a touching and an empowering one in the field of disability study. The book records her undeniable struggle against all odds of life that she faced after being diagnosed as a patient of cerebral palsy. The book is faithful records in which she chronicles her life incidents starting from childhood to maturity and presents a real picture of psychological struggle and also how she intersects all despite her physical disability. The book is a pioneer in empowering the disabilities mainly the female disability and teaches the art of Intersectionality through mental strength.

Malini Chib is one of the pioneering female figures with spastic disability from her birth. Despite her disability, she surmounts all the obstacles of her life being disabled and establishes herself as an independent one in the so-called 'abled' world. Born in 1966 in Kolkata in an Indian family, Malini Chib suffered from the insufficient supply of oxygen in her brain during her birth. Later, it caused cerebral palsy and turned her into 'disabled'. Her parents took her to London to get cured of it. With least hope, she started to cope up with her physical deformities. She was admitted to Thomas Delarue School, a special school for pupils of cerebral palsy. On returning India, she got admitted to St. Xavier's College and completed her bachelor degree. She went back to England to get a master's degree in Gender Studies at the Institute of Education, University of London. At present she is a Senior Events Manager at Oxford Bookstore in Mumbai.

Written in traditional autobiographical structure, Malini's *One Little Finger* is a journey from disability to empowerment as well as her transformation from 'permanent vegetable' to an accomplished scholar and social activist. Chib states, "During the

process, the umbilical cord got stuck around my neck, resulting in a lack of oxygen to my brain and a few seconds of that (unknown by the medical term of anoxia) eventuated in giving me a lifetime of a severe disabling condition (condition not disease!) called Cerebral Palsy (Chib 3)". Her birth was a medical mistake and transformed her into a disabled. The issue of 'normal', 'not normal', 'mentally handicapped' started to haunt the entire family. Her family did not give up hope. They visited doctors after doctors and it was finally diagnosed '... I was spastic and had Cerebral Palsy (Chib 5)'. Every doctor her parents met told them 'The doctors confidently told them that the damage to my brain was irreversible (Chib 5)'. 'Cerebral palsy is a neurological disorder characterized by impaired motor skill, which result in difficulties with walking, talking and eating. It does not inherently impact cognitive abilities. While a cure for this condition does not exist, early medical intervention, physiotherapy, and special education can significantly assist individuals in effectively managing their daily duties to varied degrees'.

After returning from England, Malini started facing the reality how the traditional view towards a person is discouraging. She would shed tears thinking her life in darkness, 'I would wonder why they were so negative to me' (Chib 17). Malini's experiences while studying at Xavier's expose her difference in public, "I felt as if I was different" (Chib 51).

Malini's encounter with the social inequality and injustice in India encourages her for future struggle.. on receipt a job as a Senior Events manager at Oxford Bookstore in India, Malini spreads her revolutionary wings for empowerment of the disabled people in Mumbai. In India the Persons with Disabilities Act (PWD) was passed in 1995 ensuring the equality to the disabled persons but in practical the difference the same. Malini along with some social activists fought against this inequality, "We believe that both 'able and disable' should work together to form an inclusive society where all are welcome and included (Chib 187)".

In 2004, the disabled were denied access to participate in Mumbai marathon. The rules of the marathon states, "No wheelchair vehicles or dogs be allowed on the course (Chib 188)".

Beyond imagination yet the issue is true. Malini formed group and agitated for their right to participate in the event. They approached to Mr. Suni Dutt, the then Sports Minister at the Centre. Rules were revised and wheelchair users were allowed to participate.

Analysis of Flight without Sight

Preti Monga's autobiographical story, *Flight Without Sight* is an encouraging one that chronicles her struggling journey as a blind woman navigating social barriers and personal challenges. Her journey from a blind woman to an accomplished entrepreneur intersects multiple aspects of her identity- gender, disability, socio-economic status, and cultural norms.



Preeti Monga lost her eyesight at the age of 13. She faced the reality of being physically blind. Her autobiographical stories *The Other Senses* and *Flight Without Sight* traverse to the path of her biographical experiences. She is a social activist, disability worker, entrepreneur, trauma counselor and a recognized visually challenged aerobics instructor. Her journey with visually impaired was not smooth, she had to face humiliation, insult and exclusion yet she never gives up her hope to secure her right of living as a God's child,

“My mission immediately expanded beyond my own small world; the dire situation of disabled people acted like a fuel to my passion of changing the negative attitude into a complete acceptance and inclusion for all” (Monga 25).

The reality of disability and the inner craving for independence always haunts her. She starts to struggle to stand against all these social prejudices that demarcate among people. The equality of living and right on the society is denied. She comes forefront with a challenging zeal,

“We are all different- with different strengths and shortcomings- and no one has the right to push others aside based upon class, cast, gender, or disability. Everyone enters the world with equal ownership of all this world has to offer and I was determined to make the world understand that” (Monga 26).

With her undaunted mind and ambition she decided to change the mindset of the society with injecting an idea ‘abilities of people with disability’ (Monga 27). The disabled body with mental trauma and ‘no money and no qualifications’ leads her to commit suicide several times but she comes out of mental depression and trauma and finally grounds her foot as an independent woman.

The harsh reality is exposed after Preeti was married to Keith. Keith's consent to marry Preeti was considered as a mere mercy to the family and sets a number of conditions as ‘he had instructed my mother to buy his daily quota of cigarettes’ (Monga 35). Her conjugal life turns into negative consequences. Preeti was beastly treated by Keith, her husband, day and night. Her insulting experiences find no answer to her parents rather her parents consoled her, “Does he even know what it means to keep an unmarried daughter at home, forever?” (Monga 37). Preeti's marital life and her experiences add much salt to her pain. Nights after nights she had to endure abuse and insult imposed by her husband.

The Discrimination of human beings on the physical, mental features remains as a long biased issue in time immemorial. Along with the gender discrimination, divisions of ‘ability’, ‘disability’, ‘impaired’, ‘physically challenged’ are the societal attitudes towards the person having such features. The Words ‘disability’ and ‘ability’, ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ remain at the centre of ambiguity of literary discussion. Malini was diagnosed that she had irreversible brain damage but she was not mentally handicapped, ‘I was normal and above average in intelligence

(Chib 9)’. The psychological conflict between body and mind started at the early stage of her life. She started to find out parameters on which the concept of ‘ability and ‘disability’ is established. Throughout her story, Malini present the harsh reality of the society that looks at the disability with negative bias. She gets contacted with society and she gradually started confronting the harsh realities of society that starts to treat her in a different way, “I began to put my head down, terribly conscious of myself and the fact that I was different from others (Chib 6)’. Her body becomes identity to the society that treats her as ‘different’. She had bit incapability of speaking but had profound perceptive and comprehensive realization of her surroundings.

One Little Finger and **Flight Without Sight** remain as the quintessential works in the in the field of female disabilities and empowerment. Nakano Glenn makes resides in her take on the importance of relationality. In her view, this concept is important because it helps problematize how the dominant categories always establish themselves by way of contrast. It also helps to highlight how the lives of different groups are inexorably interconnected. Disable women confront the double disadvantages in the society, being disabled and being a woman. Both the book intersect the social prejudices-gender, class, culture and socio-economic status of the society. Malini challenges all the odds she confronts throughout her life and builds her career as an independent one despite her disability. Her struggle and success intersects the social barriers and empowers the disabilities exclusively the female disabilities in society. *Flight Without Sight* delineates an individual's struggle and establishment of life intersecting all odd and prejudices in the society.

CONCLUSION

The stories of Maline and Preeti Monga with detail delineation of social, cultural, gender inequality not only show their fights against all prejudices but also pave the way for women empowerment in general. Their Female disabilities are repugnantly treated in our society arguing that disabled women are often portrayed as dependent, undesirable, or non-sexual. They are victimized with their double disabilities- physical and sexual. Many cultures view disabled people as undesirable or incapable of having romantic relationships, limiting their personal lives.

WORKS CITED

1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disability>
2. Morris, Jenny: *Pride Against Prejudice. The Women's Press, London, 1991.*
3. Fine, Michelle and Asch, Adrienne, eds: *Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture and Politics, Temple University Press, 1988. Philidelphia.*
4. Chib, Malini. *One Little Finger. Sage PUBLication India Private Ltd. New Delhi. Print. 2011.*
5. Monga, Preeti. *Flight Without Sight. Hay House Publishers (India) Pvt. Ltd.*
6. Glenn, Evelyn Nakano: *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor. Harvard University Press. 2002. Print.*