



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



### Portrayal of Disabled Characters in Select Indian fiction

K. Daisy Graceline Sorna,

Assistant Professor of English,

V V College of Engineering, Tisaiyanvilai.

#### Abstract

Literature exposes new realities about ourselves, disabilities, and different conceivable outcomes of how to arrange the world around us. Disabled people survive on the margins of society due to inequality, discrimination and oppression. They are always treated in different way in the society. They suffer from social exclusion as they do not fit into the social norms of what it represents to be able-bodied. The disabled people appearance in literature is to permit able-bodied people to deal with their own terrors and become more conscious of their own discriminations. This paper highlights the characters of disability in Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*, Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*. It shows how disabled person is treated as object in the society, cannot be brought under the mainstream of the society.

**Key words:** disabled, society, identity, able-bodied, struggle.

-----

#### Introduction

Literature exposes new realities about ourselves, disabilities, and different conceivable outcomes of how to arrange the world around us. Disabled people survive on the margins of society due to inequality, discrimination and oppression. A communal approach towards person with disability has changed from time to time and the different features contribute to these varying attitudes. Religion, caste, gender, culture, work, income, nationality have an important impact on the level of disability realization. As Garrison states, "disability studies conceptualizes the concept of disability as a category for critical analysis that crosses social, cultural, moral,



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



political, economic, sexual, historical, and literary boundaries” (9). Disabled human subjects have less social power and are subordinate in the social hierarchy. As Quayson appeals:

Disability returns to the aesthetic domain an active ethical core that serves to disrupt the surface of representation. Read from a perspective of disability studies, this active ethical core becomes manifest because disability representation is seen as having a direct effect on social views of people with disability in a way that representations of other literary details, tropes, and motifs do not offer. In other words, the representation of disability has an efficaciousness that ultimately transcends the literary domain and refuses to be assimilated to it. (726)

In Indian English Literature, people with disabilities are portrayed as poor, helpless, inhuman, pity and evil monsters. Society, culture, and the body are connected in the disabled person. An ideology of ability stigmatizes the disabled people. The disabled people appearance in literature is to permit able-bodied people to deal with their own terrors and become more conscious of their own discriminations. People with disabilities across the world suffer due to human apathy and cultural aversion. They suffer from social exclusion as they do not fit into the social norms of what it represents to be able-bodied. They show how disabled person is treated as object in the society, cannot be brought under the mainstream of the society. Banik Somdev defines in his work *Representation of Disabled Characters in Literature*, “physical beauty is equated to goodness of the soul, while disability to evil. The conflict between normality and deformity is presented as the archetypical conflict between good and evil, where the evil crippled characters are hell bent on destroying the good ones, and eventually getting eliminated themselves. Such disabled and deformed stereotypes abound in literature” (199).

Firdaus Kanga’s *Trying to Grow* and Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* and Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* describe how disabled people are seen in society. The substances of disability through encountering different life worlds as these are characterized in fictions. They expose a positive declaration of experiences of disability that is too often lacking in our society.



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



The experiences of disability permit for disability pride. Their characters show the real experience of disability and how able-bodied people think of disabled people. They face marks of shame of the disabled body by deconstructing the ‘ideology of ability’ through their fictions. The disabled people are always treated in different way in the society. Simi Linton in his book *Introduction to Disability Studies* argues, “setting off disability studies as a socio-political-cultural examination of disability from the interventionist approaches that characterize the dominant traditions in the study of disability” (132).

In *Trying to Grow*, Firdaus Kanga demonstrates the survival of disabled people in India. It is a fictional portrayal of disability. It is a semi-autobiographical novel. The novelist himself is suffering from a bone disease that leaped him to the bounded mobility of his wheelchair. He expresses his attitude towards the people of disability. Brit is the protagonist of the novel, suffering from osteogenesis imperfecta, a brittle bone disease. The novel describes the story of Brit’s appearance and his struggles against his father’s anti-disability prejudice. Kanga reveals the attitude of Seta, “she was trying to grapple with the reality despite knowing the stigma attached to disability not only for having a disabled child around, but also for giving birth to one. The severity of the foreseen difficulties in having an invalid child at home seems to get intensified by Sera’s words at the time of Brit’s arrival home with his bone fractured: “The holidays are over, I suppose” (*Trying to Grow* 75).

Brit looks in the mirror and he describes himself, “My neck squat as a toad’s and my hollow shoulders, one higher than the other like Richard the Third’s, my ribcage thrust forward so that it bulged at the centre and sloped down at the sides, and below that my legs thin as a famine child’s, the shins bowed as if some kid had plastered on some clay as a joke, an afterthought” (*Trying to Grow* 200). Brit’s father Sam takes continual efforts to find a cure for his son fail to produce the desired result. Brit wants to be independent and he rebels because his mother continues to treat him like a child. He is a brave and courageous boy who learns to smile in difficulty. He does not like to lose his identity.



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



Brit realizes that he is bisexual in a deeply homophobic society, and his fight for economic freedom. He is a failed person who leads a life which does not involve his self. He confesses, “I felt as if all my life I'd been bundled up against the wind, and now one by one my woolies were being taken from me” (*Trying to Grow* 169). He declares that he is a sex maniac therefore he gets it difficult to sleep during nights and goes to a level of cursing his own parents. He finds out to accept people as they are, with all their strengths and weakness. His life attains a new meaning after the emotional arrival of Cyrus into his life. Brit's struggle is for self-actualization and to fight with his physical condition significantly. He achieves an identity and faces life with optimism. He declares, “I want to be what I really am, no more acts, no more reaching for things I'm too short to reach” (*Trying to Grow* 235). His efforts and struggle for growth, development is part of his search for identity in which he understands his creative potential. The whole narration of the novel is by a handicapped young man, Brit who is ‘trying to grow.’

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, Animal is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. He is a victim of a chemical factory explosion caused by Kampani and is portrayed as a boy with a twisted spine which forces him to walk on all fours just like an animal. His back was twisted beyond repair in an industrial mishap. He is an orphan and brought up by a French nun Ma Franci. Sinha reveals the protagonist Animal's physical abnormality and mental strain. He explains the impact of the industrial disaster on people and nature at various levels. Animal narrates, “On the night I was found lying in a doorway, child of a few days, wrapped in a shawl. Whose was I am? Nobody knew. Mother, father, neighbors, all must have died for no living soul came to claim me, who was coughing, frothing etc plus nearly blind, where my eyes had screwed themselves against the burning fog were white slits bleached on the eyeballs” (*Animal's People* 14). Animal's physical defect is a result of the industrial disaster which has negatively affected his identity. The manner in which he walks on his hands makes the orphanage children call him animal.



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



Animal is intense enough to take an interest in the game called kabbadi. In addition, he is not fit to do any work, “I don’t know. No one has ever trusted me with anything before” (*Animal’s People* 25). His appearances and emotions are mapped through his comments, “No girl had ever touched me till then, less hugged. It sent a thrill through me straight to my cock. This was the first time I caught myself thinking, if only things were different with me, if I could walk upright, it might be my praises” (*Animal’s People* 36). He has hatred against human beings since they neglect to understand his sufferings and difficulties. Rather, they ridicule him. His identity is the gift of the industrial disaster. The protagonist, Animal is a human being but he is named Animal.

Animal hates to be a human being and declares that he is an animal. He says, “My name is Animal. I’m not a fucking human being. I’ve no wish to be one” (*Animal’s People* 23). He faces marks of shame at each level and many times loses his temper. Zafar advises him on the physical abnormality. He enlightens, “You should not think of that way, but as especially abled” (*Animal’s People* 23). Animal angrily says, “On my hands I learned to walk, my legs grew feeble. My hands and arms are strong, my chest is strong. The upper half of my body is like a bodybuilder’s. I walk, also run, by throwing my weight onto my hands, hauling feet forward in a kind of hop. It took a long time to master this new way of getting about. Maybe it was months, maybe a year” (*Animal’s People* 15). Sinha exhibits the pathetic condition of the boy and his life which represents thousands of Bhopal youngsters’ lives.

Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* investigates the irresolute role of characters with disabilities, both as destinations of offense and as storehouses for cultural tensions. Raja, Bim, Tara and Baba are the four neglected children of a mother addicted to playing cards. Aunt Mira looks after all the four children in the family. She finds profoundly attached to the children who begin to attach an extraordinary essentialness to her and consider her as their main support. She looks after them as if they were her own children. Baba is an autistic boy. The neglected children get love and friendship that even the autistic Baba learns to pick up bread and keep it in his



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



mouth; put his buttons himself and play marbles and bagatelle. Anita Desai clearly displays a picture of trouble, sorrow and misfortune of Bim. Bim recognizes, “her Aunt had suffered through their parents’ death, through Raja’s illness, Tara’s going away and the perpetual sorrow over Baba” (*Clear Light of Day* 89). Bim is able to place a position for herself in society. She makes a decision, “I shall work- I shall do things. I shall earn my own living- and look after Mira Masi and Baba and- and be independent” (*Clear Light of Day* 140).

Bim looks after her autistic brother, Baba. She sacrifices her own happiness for the sake of her brother. She identifies, “It was Baba’s silence and reserve and otherworldliness that she had wanted to break open and ransack and rob” (*Clear Light of Day* 164). She turns into an alternate mother to her brother Baba. The presence of Baba in the house is an everlasting source of sorrow to his family. Though he is not self-supporting, Bim has continuously helped to all his needs. She is like a ray of hope in Baba’s life. Baba is feminized by his disability in explicit ways: he does not contribute in the public world, and he is extremely delicate. However, Baba additionally lives in a semiotic world, opposing section into the symbolic by means of his music and his mutterings. Though externally, Baba does grow up to be a man, mentally he still appears to be an everlasting child. Anita Desai reveals that the world of Baba has been the most dejected, miserable and pitiful person. He is unable to taking care of himself in a merciless world.. The genuine noteworthiness of her goals can be found in reality that she looks for her totality and wholeness in her autistic brother Baba.

### Conclusion

Firdaus Kanga, Indra Sinha and Anita Desai take disability characters in their fiction and explain how they survive and thrive in the society. The novelists take greater risks to select the people with disabilities as central characters. . They explain the struggle of disabled persons and they focus on the trauma of creativity and the embarrassments. Firdaus Kanga’s *Trying to Grow* and Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* and Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* are the novels of



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



education. The fictions educate the readers that disabled people have authorized right to survive in the least restrictive surroundings in the society along with able-bodied people as equals.

### Works cited

Banik Somdev. *Representation of Disabled Characters in Literature. International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation studies*, vol.3, no. 2, 2016, p.199.

Desai Anita. *Clear Light of Day*. Random House, 2007.

Garrison, H. *Adolescent Perceptions of the Socio-cultural Construct of Disability When Responding To Literature Of Mice and Men*. Fordham University, 2007, p.9.

Kanga, Firdaus. *Trying to Grow*. Bloomsbury, 1989.

Linton, Simi. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York University Press, 1998, p.132.

Quayson. "The Novel, Volume One: History, Geography, and Culture". *Fecundities of the Unexpected: Magical Realism, Narrative, and History*, edited by Franco Moretti, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, p.726.

Sinha, Indra. *Animal's People*. Simon and Schuster, 2007.