



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



Disability Representation In *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki* And *Jane Eyre*: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The chief concern of this paper is to inquire how disability is represented in *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki* of T. D. Ramakrishnan and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, under her penname Currer Bell. In both the novels, the chief characters undergo accidental disability. And the novels are narrated in the perspective of Peter Jeevanandam and Jane. Both their loved ones are physically permanently met with human accidents. So from different point of views, the reunion of the lovers and their hard journey of lives are well portrayed through the writers. *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki*, a Malayalam work on Sri Lankan Civil war and *Jane Eyre*, a Victorian romantic work are well acknowledged in the global arena. Sugandhi, Andal Devanayaki, Bertha and Rochester, who plays a key role in the fictions attracts the readers. They are depicted with physical or mental disability in the fiction. This paper intends to create a deeper understanding of the representation of disability in literature comparing the fictions of two different ages with the political representation of two continents.

Disability Studies is an academic discipline, which analyze the meaning, scope and consequences of being disabled. The Society for Disability Studies, an international nonprofit organization strives for the study of disability in social, cultural and political context noted that,

Using interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches, Disability Studies sits at the intersection of many overlapping disciplines in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Programs in Disability Studies should encourage a curriculum that allows students, activists, teachers, artists, practitioners, and researchers to engage the subject matter from various disciplinary perspectives (SDS).

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Autobiographies and biographies were the two major genres where disability literature began. Then the area of study utilizes multi-disciplinary aspects of disability involving history, literature, science, gender studies and other social sciences in its intellectual facets. As the discipline progressed, disability and impairment are treated as two subgenres within Disability Studies. Medical and social disabilities are broader categories comprises of visible and invisible impairment.

Through the paper an analysis on the representation of the disabled characters in two fictions are to be drawn. T. D. Ramakrishnan's *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* represents the difficulties faced by the characters, who undergoes the phase of accidental disability in abundance. The writers intentionally utilize disability as a medium to convey the socio-political circumstance that the characters undergone along with medical condition. When *Sugandhi* represents the after effects of accidents, terrorist attack and war, *Jane Eyre* being a Victorian romance conveys illness, love and revenge as its disability theme. Carrie Sandahl noted that, "comprehensive history of disability life writing has yet to be written" and "war both produces and valorizes certain forms of disability". He even treated polio as "disability" (Davis 451). Sandahl also considered HIV/AIDS and breast cancer as disability. So, any disease, disorder or lack of organs can be treated as disability. T. D. Ramakrishnan introduced the character Thambimuthu as,

LTTE yude military vibhagathilayirunna thambi muthu pathu varsham munb
yuddhathil idathukaalinde muttinu thazhe ulla bhagan nashtapettathinu seshamanu
media vibhagathilek mariyath. Camerayum editingum sound recordingumulppade
ella karyangalilum nalla experience undayirunnengilum thambimuthuvine
cinemayude aestheticsinepatti valiyadharanayillayirunnu. Njangalude iratti
pryayamulla karuthu athikam pokkamillathe thadichurunda manushyan. Alpam
kashandiyum narayum. Krithrimakaalu vechittanengilum valare churuchurukkode
karyangal cheyyanulla thambimuthuvinde kazhivu kandal athbbutam thonnum
(69).

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It means Thambimuthu, a war veteran, joined the media department after losing the leg below the left knee in LTTE attack. He was well versed in camera, editing and sound recording, though lacks in cinematic aesthetics. “He was a dark, stocky man, nearly twice our age. He was grey and balding. The energetic way in which he moved despite his artificial limb surprised me” (Nair 54). Such descriptions depict the positive connotation of disability, through social acceptance.

Depending upon the duration, disability can be divided as permanent and temporary. Temporary disability affects the individual for a short period of time with eventual recovery. It spans a couple of days, weeks, months or years and illnesses or injuries that resist the individual from routine activities like walking, bathing, driving, or working can be resumed. Bronchitis, Chickenpox or sprained ankles are treated as temporary disability. Permanent disability being a permanent inability of an individual is a long-term disability. It is caused by an injury, accident or illness or genetic or disorder by birth that leads to permanent impairment of the individual from daily routines and the chance of recovery seems feeble.

In *Jane Eyre* Helen Burns, a close friend of Jane in Lowood Institution died due to Consumption, an ancient term used for Tuberculosis. The Victorian medical condition can be identified as,

while disease had thus become an inhabitant of Lowood, and death its frequent visitor; while there was gloom and fear within walls; while its rooms and passages steamed with hospital smells, the drug and the pastille striving vainly to overcome the effluvia of mortality, ...a handful of herbs and blossoms to put on a coffin” (Bronte 73).

Mr. Brocklehurst and family stopped visiting Lowood fearing contagious nature of typhus and consumption. But the kids were given cold pie or bread and cheese, without considering the climate and the nature of disease. Kids were left freed in woods, for physical exercise which supposedly creates immunity, without considering it as a bacterial or airborne infection. The philosophical conversation of Jane and Helen on Helen’s death bed, due to consumption shows the fear and spiritual romanticism offered to death with the word “Resurgam” (Bronte 79) in the tomb which means ‘I will rise again’ refers to resurrection in Victorian era. Bronte noted that

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Lowood was unhygienic before the ‘typhus’ phase and the condition improved with the transfer of authority. Orphan kids were isolated and literally abounded. So, the relationship between economy and social status affects disability, treatment and social interaction. Mrs. Fairfax had hearing issues as she pointed that “I am a little deaf” (Bronte 93), which is partial disability. But through such characters Bronte intended to make the reader understand the condition and trauma that those characters undergo.

An acquired disability is a disability that the person undergoes after birth. Invisible disability is a disability that cannot be seen whereas visible disabilities can be noticed evidently, like lack of hands, legs or being Siamese with partial body. In *Sugandhi*, the character Sugandhi lost both her hands and she was dependent on Arulmozhi Nange and Yamuna Sreedhar. They type the creative articles that Meenakshi Rajarathinam alias Sugandhi dictates and they recorded the video message. And the recorded video thus states that,

I can sense your surprise at my appearance and my faltering voice. You might wonder if it is the same person who posts fiery messages. Yes, it is me. My face was disfigured by acid. My arms end at my elbows. In 2009, I was captured by the Sri Lankan military in Mullaitivu after the last battle, along with Isaipriya. As I was beautiful, they wanted to present me to the VIPs. So they took me to Colombo in a military boat. ... I don’t know what happened to my three-year-old daughter, Kadalpura (Nair 204).

In *Sugandhi*, the civil war leads to disabilities. Sugandhi narrated that the army brutally raped her and enjoyed the Sri Lankan victory on her body. Then in the torture camp in Divine Pearl, she was caught, while escaping and the Military chief ordered to chop her hands and to attack the face with acid as punishment. Officer Robert Jayawardene intentionally dipped her hand in the acid to brutally hurt her in favour of Sinhalese government. To escape from the torture fourfold instruction were given to her including supporting government and depriving VP and Iyakkam in press conference. Peter cried of her first sight as a victim acid of attack, while watching the video send by Sugandhi. It shows her helplessness being handicapped.

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She added that “he painted my right cheek with acid” (Nair 206) and then disfigured the left side. And after a week, when the pain in the cheeks subsided, the order for chopping hands was about to carry out, that too, one by one to make it more painful. She already lost the eye sight in the left side, with the acid. Though she agreed for a press conference after healing acid wounds, she revealed truth in front of the media. She was transported to Canada as a safety hideout with the help of international media. But after three months the punishment was carried out in Canada by the criminal and limbs were taken in a bag to avoid rejoining it in her body.

Meenakshi took care of the almost dead Sugandhi, who lost a lot of blood and brought her back to life. Sugandhi’s words to Peter “You used to say my cheeks and lips are more beautiful than anyone else’s. I want to be kissed by you. If I remove my veil, you won’t be able to do it. Kiss my forehead. My cheeks are just pieces of flesh” (Nair 226). Peter kissed her burns, as he forgotten about her disfigured face and his love turns to be her strength. When the suicide bomber, who was supposed to drive the car, was arrested, Sugandhi initiated driving it herself. She drove the car to Rajapaksa Theatre, renamed as Nelam Pokuna Rajapaksa Theatre for CHOGM. And the news visuals of a handless suicide attacker spread widely. It shows, disabilities can overcome with decisiveness and rather than medical, social model creates worst tensions in the society.

From multiple perspectives disabilities are characterized into various categories. There are physical and mental disabilities, which are caused by birth, genetic, accident or illness, visibly or invisibly. In an accident Mr. Rochester sprained his foot and the movement was restricted for a limited span and medical aid was availed. It is thus described in *Jane Eyre* as “half reclined on a couch appeared Mr. Rochester, his foot supported by a cushion” (Bronte 116). Mr. Mason bleeds and Jane nursed him. Mason’s condition is thus narrated as,

... bleeding patient drooped, moaned, sickened and neither day nor aid arrived. I had again and again held the water to Mason’s white lips; again and again offered him the stimulating salts: my efforts seemed ineffectual: either bodily or mental suffering, or loss of blood, or all three combined, were fast prostrating his strength (Bronte 207).

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Mason was attacked by the mysterious lady and she bit him like a tigress when Rochester took knife from her. “The shoulder is just bandaged” and wound of teeth to be taken care of thus identified in the arm and Mason said “she sucked the blood, she said she’d drain my heart” (Bronte 208) are the instances proving Bertha’s mental ill health. Mr. Briggs, a solicitor reported the marriage of Mr. Rochester with Richard Mason’s sister Bertha Antoinetta Mason. She is described by Rochester as,

...mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard!-as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points. I had a charming partner-pure, wise, modest: you can fancy I was a happy man. ... I invite you all to come up to the house and visit Mrs. Poole’s patient and my wife (Bronte 288).

Bertha was locked in the tapestried room with great bed and torial cabinet, where Grace Poole was the caretaker. Bronte further added Jane’s point of view of the event. When Rochester met her “the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat vicariously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled”. Bertha was physically as equal as her husband and shows “virile force” and “throttled him”. He wrestled and tied her in the chair and compared her with Jane. He talked about the unfortunate Bertha with hatred and “vindictive antipathy” (Bronte 296). Bertha, with genetic mental disorder, portrayed as an antagonist and victim in *Jane Eyre*. But despite of sympathy, Jane was cruel in her words of describing Bertha negatively, showing Bronte’s view on the context.

Bertha fired Thornnfield Hall and died in the pavement and Rochester’s attempt of saving her failed. Butler described Rochester’s condition after the accident as “stone blind” since “there was a great crash-all fell” and was taken out from the ruins alive and severely “hurt”. Though the beam protected partly “one eye was knocked out and one hand so crushed that Mr. Carter, the surgeon, had to ampute it directly. The other eye inflamed: he lost the sight of that also” and added further that “he is now helpless, indeed- blind and a cripple” and “broken down” in Old

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John's home (Bronte 425). It is true that, "unlike other marginalized groups, then, disabled people have been hyper-represented in mainstream culture; they have not been disregarded so much as they have been subjected to objectifying notice in the form of mediated starting" (Davis 450-451).

Jane visited him and described his eyes as "once brilliant and now ray less eyes" (Bronte 430). "Blind lameter" "pity to see your eyes and scar of fire on the head" and "a sightless block" (Bronte 431-448) are the few terms used to show his disability. For two years Rochester was completely blinded and though he cannot read or write with partial and distinctive eyesight regained by one eye with medical treatment, he manages to walk alone in the climax. The romanticisation of Rochester's accidental disability and treating Bertha indifferently proves marginalization of gender and insensible treatment on different types of disability.

T. D. Ramakrishnan uses Mangala's tale to Raja Raja Chola, the myth of a lion and Suppadevi couple, who was blessed with twins: Sinhabahu and Sinhasavali and as per myth, Sinhabahu's hands and legs were similar to lion and rest of the body seems human. Sinhabahu was depicted as an abnormal child, born as human-lion hybrid, and such abnormalities are also treated as disability. But the decisive Sinhabahu created Sinhapura, his own kingdom declining kingship of Vanga dynasty, showcasing success story of a physically different person. The social model of disability states that society organizes disability, rather than physical or medical impairment or difference.

In Sigiriya or Sinhasailam, Maheendan, cuts Devanayaki's breasts learning her plotting against him, as revenge to her three year old daughter Kooveni's death. She lost her body part, but she was considered as goddess and epitome of beauty by her admirers even after losing her organs. She became gigantic up to the sky placing one leg in Sigiriya and one in Sreepada hill, mesmerising the tale of Roopavathi. It states that disability or impairment is social construct than physical or medical. She was also considered as the incarnation of Kannaki of *Chilappathikara*. People with gigantic or tiny physique are also treated as disabled by the society. The gigantic body of Devanayaki frightened the evil and rest of the society praised and worshipped her.



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Bertha faced a genetic mental disorder that is invisible and permanent, as described in the fiction connecting Refrigerator Mother Theory of disability. Rochester and Sugandhi lost their organs and lost partial eyesight permanently. The minor characters also encountered disabilities, mostly acquired in nature. Difficulties in acquired disability are resuming to work and adjustment to the state of disability. Since acquired disability is a condition that caused due to accident, illness or disorders through love and acceptance of the society and loved ones, the negation attributed to the state of disability can be altered. Physical disabilities can overcome with mental strength. So, the more serious disability as per the reading of *Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki* and *Jane Eyre* is social model. And more than physical impairment the sympathetic and restrictive attitude of the society marginalizes mentally and physically disabled individuals.

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