

Exploration of Disability in Ruskin Bond's Short Story *Most Beautiful*

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Abstract: In literature, both oral and written forms have featured representations of disabled personae. Like so called customary characters the disabled strive to make their own spheres and identities in the short fictions. But their spheres and identities are never same in the standard like that of other usual characters. Such personae are always represented as the peripheries to the normal ones. We never try to bring sufficient light on them to explore them as we do on the normal characters. Instead, we often embody them negatively as evil or sinister agent satisfying the stereotype of handicapism “twisted mind in twisted body”. This paper tries to look into how disability has been represented positively breaking the stereotype of handicapism in a short story *Most Beautiful* by an Indian author of British decent Ruskin Bond.

Keywords: normality, disability, handicapism, stereotype, evil.

Introduction:

Stories invested with disabled or deformed characters to show how the society looks upon them within the predefined framed structure, be it oral or written, mythologies or fantasies, folk or fiction. They are usually introduced in the plot to serve the various purposes as the derivatives to the main characters except biography like *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller, *Joni* by Joni Fareckson, or *The Other Senses* by Preeti Monga where disability is treated positively. Often society considers them as insignificant, evil or sin, the sense of which perpetuates our notion about them. According to Bowe, “Our memories of these and other characters often become indelible, imperious to any experiences we may have with disabled individuals in real life. Somewhere in the back of our mind we associate disabilities with sin, evil and danger”. [1] Prejudices lead to ill treatment of such people by demonizing or misrepresenting them instead of exploring them. But the social scientists, humanists and, also literary artists for the progress of time try to craft them to explore their inner self with beauty in the focus of the society, which is a subject of exploration not imposition with the traditional notion or epithet. According to Sammelan president Shamsundar Bidarkundi, a renowned Kannada author and poet “Literature is not about just reading and writing but the words and their meanings guide the people”. [2] So, literature has a role of guiding principles to get the unnoticed noticed and to

try to eradicate the biased and totemic notion towards the disabled.

Overview of Disability in Literature:

Classical literature is the most pertinent place where disable bodied characters are irrationally and exaggeratedly presented to perpetuate certain morals and values in the society. Culture and civilization perpetuate the values it cherishes by representing stereotype of disability consciously or unconsciously. Margolis and Shapiro argue that... “(classical literature) provides interpretation, teaches in the form of allegory, and provides models for identification and behaviour. It also gives readers materials and ideas to reflect upon, including those that promote and reinforce handicapism. Literature is a resource for society”. [3] In different genres of literature extending from epics to classics to children's literature, disabled personas are not only treated as dalit but also presented as malicious agent for causing hazards in the life of normal characters. And often without any genuine justification and showing proper treatment towards them. In our two epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* we have such prototypes namely Dasi Manthara and Shakuni, though their names are very suggestive. Not being fully realized, they are presented as one- dimensional and type- characters. Manthara is presented in such way that she has created a permanent impression in our mind that every hunch- backed man and woman means evil or sinister agent. Not only Manthara we have another example in Quasimodo, a character in Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. He is hunch-backed and represented as villain in the plot. We have another example in Dhritarashtra whose blindness-though metaphorical- is synonymous with evil and sin, suggesting his inability to distinguish between right and wrong.

In society, physical or external deformity is often taken for granted as the standard or index for defining the mental or internal defects. In most of the literary texts (fictions) that try to embody disability, it is not an exception too. This epithet “twisted mind in the twisted body” is used as a rhetorical tool to portray the malicious and ominous. In those fictions, we find physical beauty is synonymous with goodness of soul, whereas deformity with evil, or sin, where the disabled characters, portrayed as evil and crippled, are hell bent to ruin the virtuous, only to be ultimately eliminated themselves. Such stereotypical portrayals of disability and deformity are prevalent in literature across cultures-be it Eastern or Western, Indian, or European.

Beyond such negative portrayal, individuals with disability are also represented as pitiable creatures who have to depend on able-bodied people for their survival, which is strengthened by our negative and paternalistic attitude. In fact, disabled people are made by the prevalent social structures to form a minority group much like other social, ethnic, religious, linguistic groups, and face discrimination from the mainstream society. Gartner has compared this discrimination to racism saying that “Just as whites have imposed their images upon blacks, and men upon women, people without disa-

bilities have imposed their image upon people who are disabled. These images have told us not only what is beautiful -and right; they have also warned us that the image of disability is ugly-and evil.” [4]

Disability Represented in *Most Beautiful*

In a research article titled, “Representation of Disabled Characters in Literature” Dr. Somdev Banik tries to investigate the different aspects in the representation of disability in literature. But he doesn’t try to show disability can break the stereotype of disability excluding biography. Here in this paper, I will try to show, how disability in a fiction can be emerged breaking the stereotype notion of the society.

Ruskin Bond's short story, *Most Beautiful* is a text where disability goes to break the totemic notion of disability to some extent. Bond in his speculative and inventive story *Most Beautiful* tries to explore the inner beauty of a disabled boy breaking the stereotype notion of “twisted mind in twisted body” and that of handicapism, the reality that the society holds up towards them still now consciously or unconsciously through the behavioural and cultural practices.

Most Beautiful is a story about a retarded and deformed boy, Suresh who is teased and tormented by the heartless urchins of the city. The narrator takes pity on the boy. He gives him sympathy and love. In the story Bond brings out the boy's bitterness at his own deficiencies and, society's indifference towards him.

In the bazaar of the big, crowded city the narrator saw a boy being teased by urchins. He had his sympathy with the boy but he did not interfere till the boy was hit by a stone pelted by one of the mischief mongers. The urchins dispersed when the narrator interfered. In the opening we find the deep-rooted mentality against the disabled. Out of this Suresh is supposed as unnatural or outcaste of society and a violence is being exercised upon. But he tries to be being like them. But his gibberish talk becomes the parameter of judgement, not his soul. However, the narrator takes the matter in his hand out of only sympathy. Here he also cannot devoid of the traditional notion.

The boy's name was Suresh. He was about thirteen. His face is full of scar marks due to small pox. He was small with short and stumpy bowed legs. He had a small chest, and made incoherent noises. He was bleeding a little. The narrator wanted to lead him safely to his house. The boy could not tell him where he lived. The narrator accompanied the boy who at last stopped in front of a house. The narrator presumed it to be his house and knocked on the door. A young woman of about 35 opened the door. She was Suresh's mother. As soon as Suresh saw her, he threw his arms around her neck. He burst into tears giving vent to his pent-up emotions. Here Suresh's physical descriptions gradually become the parameters of his identity. He is judged not as normal as they are. But Suresh has an innate beauty and sensation which is revealed when he threw his arms around her mother

bursting into tears. Significantly it is very clear Suresh has all emotional perception which society avoids under terming him disable.

Suresh's mother thanked the narrator and asked him into the house. She told him that Suresh was her only son. She loved him but her husband was disappointed in him. She asked him if he thought that Suresh was very ugly. The narrator gave a philosophical answer. He said beauty and ugliness were relative words. They meant different things to different people. Nothing was absolute in the world except death and birth. Here Suresh is judged also by his physical outlook not by society but by parents which comes as hindrance to the exposition of inner reality which is same as in the normal physique.

While they were talking, her husband came there. He curtly thanked the narrator for bringing the boy home. Apparently, he was indifferent to his son. When the narrator left the house, she asked him to visit again. No one except the narrator had treated the boy as a normal human being. He had given the boy love and sympathy which he craved for. This also shows how even a parent be indifferent to his son and does not explore him. His treatment towards him testifies the social constructs of handicapism. Even a psychological violence acts upon him from home.

After a week the narrator went to Suresh's house again. The narrator took the boy for a walk in the field outside the city. Suresh saw things that he had never seen before. He saw a group of hermaphrodite musicians. These masculine-looking people dressed in women's clothes and wearing jewellery looked odd to Suresh. He laughed. The narrator taught him how to swim in stream. Many things, strange and new, aroused Suresh's curiosity. This is the process of revelation. It shows a humour; sense of aesthetics does not confine to body. Here Suresh gradually exposes himself, his inner reality which brings calm on his mind and soul. It is the narrator who becomes able to explore him.

One day they were coming back from their walk. A kid followed them. It had lost its herd. Suresh took it home. For the next few days, he was always with the kid. He fed it and played with it. The kid looked attractive and everyone admired it. Suresh began to feel that people found the kid more handsome than him. He became jealous of it and killed it. Here Suresh gradually exposes his sense love towards kid as well like us breaking demonizing notion related to such an awkward figure. Simultaneously, a complexity also develops having been obsessed with the idea that the kid gets much loved by his all dears than him, perhaps finding that the kid is more beautiful than him. This ultimately leads him to kill the kid. This seems to conform as the meaningful behaviour assigned to disability, though actually not. It's a kind of complexity of a person without disability.

When the narrator visited Suresh's house next, Suresh's mother was very upset because not only Suresh had killed the kid but he had no regrets. Later the narrator took Suresh for a walk to the bank of the stream. He asked Suresh if he had enjoyed killing the kids. He smiled and nodded his

head. Then he took a pen-knife from his pocket, bared his belly, and wanted the narrator to stab him. The narrator took the knife from Suresh and threw it into the stream. Apparently here Suresh emerges as sin or evil. But through his activities it is very clear he bears a heart of high sensitivity. So, he suffers from prick of conscience which shows that he is not evil, or sin or unkind. He is a child of profound human sensitivity.

After a few weeks the narrator received an offer of a job in Delhi. He decided to take it. He went to Suresh's house to say goodbye to him and his mother. She was disappointed but Suresh was apparently indifferent. The narrator felt hurt because their friendship seemed to mean nothing to Suresh. He appeared to treat the narrator as if he too was one of these outsiders who tormented him.

The narrator's train was at eight o'clock in the evening. He found a seat near a window in a third-class compartment. The train was about to move when he saw Suresh at the platform looking for him. The narrator called to him. Suresh hobbled toward him. The train had started to move. The narrator shouted to him, "I'll be back next year." Suresh waved toward him but tumbled down against someone's bedding.

In last part of the story there is an exposition of a complete human being. Though initially it seems he testifies to the epithet conferred upon him by the society to the narrator but immediately after, it shows how he is deeply shocked hearing the separation of friendship and pure love. So, Suresh's mute expression is more than that of normal characters. And he testifies to the all, what the society needs and without exploring these within him, he has been termed disabled. Beauty lies in the core not in shell.

Finally, we see him to be emerged as a complete human being full of aesthetic sense, moral values, and inner beauty. So, handicapped, disabled, disability are consciously socio-political constructs by the society to confine them to a periphery, to prove the cultivated and long-cherished motto, "twisted mind in the twisted body". But in Bond's *Most Beautiful* disability emerges as the breaker of that motto exploring the unexplored.

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