



Portrayals of Gender and Disability: An Introspection into Societal Bias as Presented in Tagore's "Subha" and Siraj's *Alik Manush*

Priti Das

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Murshidabad University, West Bengal, India.

Email: pdeng@msduniv.ac.in

ABSTRACT: *This paper intends to explore, through a critical lens, how socially constructed norms surrounding gender and disability shape the lived experiences of people. It also examines how stereotypes about masculinity and femininity work as an important factor in determining the life of an individual. It is a truth that both women and men with disabilities are affected by societal discrimination. However, the experience is even more intense for disabled females. Sometimes, the disabled men are considered virulent despite their social isolation; on the contrary, women with disabilities are deemed more passive and burdensome than men. Literature has contributed to portraying the perpetuation of discriminatory attitudes in society. By assessing R. N. Tagore's short story "Subha" and Sayad Mustafa Siraj's novel Alik Manush, this paper meditates on how literature acts as a source of the discriminatory attitude of society. Moreover, the paper examines the role of the carer in reconsidering an inclusive future for the disabled. Thus, the paper calls for a more liberal and open-minded social system that acknowledges and values the disabled across gender lines. It also asserts the need to dismantle deep-rooted sociocultural norms that recognise disabled identities regardless of gender.*

KEYWORDS: *Gender, Disability, Masculinity, Femininity, Suffering, Dependence, Society.*

INTRODUCTION

The idea of disability is deeply rooted in the core of one's mentality. It is not just a physical barrier but also a societal construct that can impact how individuals view themselves and are viewed by others. The notion of disability can vary greatly depending on cultural convictions, historical context, and personal experiences. That is why individuals may have different viewpoints regarding the idea of disability. However, it is a fact that a child born with a disability can cause disappointment for their parents, regardless of whether the disability is physical, mental, visual, or any other type of impairment. The most important factor in the disabled child's acceptance in society is the extent of impairment and the degree of dependency on his or her family. Some parents experience significant stress while raising their disabled child.

Again, some parents themselves feel shame for their handicapped child, as they regard him or her as an extension of themselves. Besides, in the back of people's minds, they link disability

with evil, sin, or retribution for any misdeed committed in a previous life. These kinds of misconceptions and superstitions lead to the maltreatment of such people, negating their rights to a normal living. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) puts it, in “visual rhetorics of disability,” the disabled figures become a reflection of societal anxieties and inconsistencies. Such discussions not only provide us with how disabled people are perceived in society but also how they are talked about within their community. The way disabled people are portrayed in the narrative, in a way, reduces them to their mere drawbacks, completely negating their inherent human traits.

The negative, patriarchal society brings obstacles for such people who feel frustrated most of the time. This societal discrimination affects all disabled individuals, regardless of their gender. However, when this impairment comes to the female gender, its results are much more adverse than the male. In a male-dominated society, being a woman is itself a disability, let alone being a disabled woman. As opined by Simone de Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 14). Beauvoir, here, talked about the difference between biological sex and the social norms and ideas that have grown up around it over time, which are called “gender.” She meant that even though a person is born a woman, they become a member of the female gender through their specific upbringing and socialization into their culture, which gives womanhood certain meanings (and sometimes privileges, but more often limitations). In this paper, I will explore the inner sufferings faced by the disabled character from R.N. Tagore’s short story “Subha” (1892) and Sayad Mustafa Siraj’s novel *Alik Manush* (1988), as well as the societal double standards towards these two characters: one female, Subhashini, and another, male, Manirujjaman.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature reflects existing social, cultural, political, educational, and personal relationships. Rabindranath Tagore, the most prominent modern Indian intellectual, is widely considered an idealist and a liberal humanist. His humanism relied on the strong faith in the idea of inherent human goodness, liberty, and the spiritual oneness of all. One of his greatest endeavours was to bring harmony and peace against narrow nationalism, prejudice, and religious bigotry. Through his writings and social criticism, he promoted ideas that were firmly rooted in both Indian tradition and liberal values across the world. He had a vision of a society ruled by kindness, compassion, and moral responsibility. He expressed his dissent outright against any form of hackneyed social system, especially those that devalued women and the helpless. Tagore had a keen eye for recognising the social perspectives related to the sorrow, despair, and loneliness of women.

In his works, the silence of women sometimes becomes identical to that of nature. In his short story “Subha,” we find Subhashini as the youngest of the three daughters of Banikantha, who is a prosperous gentleman. The first two daughters are married off suitably. Banikantha is now worried for Subha because she is dumb. Tagore’s ironic approach in the story highlights the pathos of the protagonist, as her situation is in stark contrast to her name, Subhashini, which means one who talks sweetly. She is a silent burden to her parents. Her mother finds it her fault for giving birth to a dumb child. She is disgusted with her daughter, as she considers her a blemish on her womb. Thus, here, we see the conventional prejudice against the disabled, who are not considered blessings of God.

Although Subha’s father loves her, he believes it will be challenging to find a groom for her. Her relatives consider her an outcome of God’s curse. Subha’s parents, like other people,

express their anxiety for the uncertainty of the unfortunate girl's future openly in her presence. Even they cannot think that she has a heart that receives all impressions. Deprived of her mother's affection and care, Subha withdraws from social touch and seeks solace from Mother Nature. Tagore is unique in portraying the emotional bond between nature and the speechless girl whose speeches of silence are incomprehensible to the unkind human world. Apart from Nature, the domestic animals are her companions in solitude. When her family reproaches her, she rushes to the cowshed to alleviate her mental affliction. The dumb creatures can sense her, and gently rub their horns against her arms to make her realise that they care for her. It is harsh to admit that because of her speech impairment, Subha is neglected by her own family. In the social circle, only Pratap, a vagabond lad whom everyone considers worthless, becomes Subha's companion.

Again, a reinforcement that the relationship between a disabled and a normal person is not welcomed in the society Subha belongs to. But nature, as an affectionate, benevolent mother, always provides solace to Subha against the heartless human world. She feels the advent of mysterious adolescence in her body amidst natural phenomena. Strong youthful vigour throbs within her. She enjoys the thrill as well as the despair of adolescence amidst the beauty of the moonlit nights. But a blow strikes her when she comes to know that her father has arranged her marriage from distant Calcutta. Her father does so because he fears that the people of the village may reveal the fact of her dumbness to the future in-laws of Subha.

Marriage was the ultimate destiny of a Bengali woman in the nineteenth century. Subha's parents seek relief from their worries by marrying off their burdensome daughter. They are too selfish to sense Subha's predicament. They fail to understand that transferring her from a simple village life to a sophisticated city life would be a significant adjustment. Subha fears that her life is going to change dramatically. Amidst such apprehensions, she is finally married off, concealing the fact of her disability to speak to her in-laws. However, when her husband comes to know the truth, he readily renounces her. The story ends with the line like this- "This time her husband marries a girl with speaking ability after carefully examining the bride with both his eyes and ears." (Tagore 138) Thus, Tagore has delineated Subha's tragedy at the hands of patriarchal society, where there is no one to care for a speech-impaired girl, not even her parents.

Sayad Mustafa Siraj (1930–2012) is an important figure in modern Bengali literature. Siraj's *Alik Manush* is the most informative documentation of the Muslim community and its folk culture in 20th-century rural Bengal. His writing has a deep philosophical undertone. He has very subtly depicted the socio-cultural milieu of the Bengali Muslim communities in this novel in a collage form. Though the themes of gender and disability in Siraj's works are not much highlighted, his nuanced portrayal of marginalised characters is extraordinary and depicted with utmost empathy. With tremendous dexterity, Siraj has presented a fascinating real-mystical story of a Pir-like figure named Badiujjaman and his family. In his family, there are his mother Kamrunnisa, his wife Saida, and three sons named Nurujjaman, Manirujjaman, and Shafiujjaman, respectively. Though the main plot revolves around the conflict between the orthodox Badiujjaman and his sceptic, liberal son Shafiujjaman, who thinks man is the maker of his destiny in contrast to his father's conviction of man being controlled by the Almighty, it also creates a fictional space for the born handicapped Manirujjaman, the second son of Badiujjaman.

Manirujjaman is both physically and mentally handicapped. Saliva dribbles down his chin continuously. He always swings and sucks his fingers. He has to take support of his haunches,

resting them against the floor to move forward. He even very often pees on the bed at night at the age of eighteen. But his mother, Saida, never complains about this. She takes care of him tirelessly. She feeds and washes him. When she goes to sleep, she takes him by her side. He is given herbal medicine mixed with opium to soothe his mental unrest. Saida knows that her second son will never be her support in old age, yet she does not neglect him. Here, we see that despite being completely dependent on his family, Manirujjaman, unlike Subha, is never disregarded by his mother for his physical impairment because he is the male member, an indispensable part of a paternalistic society. Indeed, he suffers badly, as he is not able to speak or move. Sometimes he groans strangely. But his family members care for him. The gradual change in Mani's behaviour is shown in the novel. With the advent of adolescence, he is found to indicate to his little brother something that has a hint of masturbation. He is married off to a fair, beautiful girl of twelve named Dilruk, alias Ruku, who is not only normal but much more intelligent, as narrated by Siraj. And here we see no concealment on the part of Mani's parents, unlike Subha's to his in-laws, because faults in men are nothing to be worried about. Mani is found to be very wild at the time of intimacy with his wife. He has so much lust that he does not even leave his wife at the time of reading the Quran. So, the discrepancy of gender is starkly exposed, where, being a disabled male, Mani takes power to subdue his normal wife, and his wife has to put up with him.

However, gradual progress is seen in Manirujjaman. He is now able to walk with a stagger. If he stumbles, he does not like to be supported by his mother. So, we see that disabled persons also do not want to see themselves as objects of pity, like normal beings. Yet, his mother does not fail to accompany him. Though she does not have to feed or wash him now, she still instructs him, standing by his side. She feels happy that, after all, Mani is now able to walk, though clumsily, or speak, though incoherently, with the effect of either herbal medicines or her worship at the darga of a lame Pir. This is indeed a wonder that Mani has changed abruptly after his marriage to Ruku. He is now able to wipe the dribbles of saliva coming from his mouth. The numbness in his hands has worn off with daily massage. He himself tries to eat. Something like an impetus has infused in him that motivates him to present himself as a normal being. But sometimes this enthusiasm has made him violent.

One day, he seems to intend not to be fed by his mother but by his wife. However, Ruku pays the least attention to him. When breakfast is offered by his mother, he kicks the plate away in rage. Saida is so enraged that she beats him with her slipper for the first time, saying, "Brute! Devil! I will kill you today. How dare you waste a hard-earned meal?" (Siraj 118) This scene is upsetting because he can decline if something is disliked by him. But he is treated like a child, not as an adult. After the heat of the moment, he also tries to grip his mother's saree to counterattack her. Seeing such fuss, all his wife Ruku feels like doing is escaping from the house, at least for a day. She is all done with her husband and his sexual appetite. He has a beast-like instinct that does not make him consider whether she is well or going through menstruation. But she can't leave him because she is a woman who can't go against social norms, unlike Subha's husband, who leaves Subha without a second thought.

However, over time, Manirujjaman begins to lead a normal life with the assistance of his family members. He becomes able to walk enough to go to the mosque for Namaz. He becomes the father of a son, and this is something that boosts his confidence. After spending some time in the seclusion of the mosque, Mani seems to have a spiritual feeling. The tranquillity of the abode of the Almighty, with its quiet pool, woods, solitude, moonbeams, darkness, stars, etc., gives him an unworldly feeling. Here in his loneliness, he realises that his wife does not like

him. He thinks “his beautiful wife considers him nothing but a tree or animal. This agitates and torments him.” (Siraj 227) Days pass by this way, and one day, Mani is found dead in the mosque. People rumour that it is an evil spirit that kills him. A feeling of remorse grips Ruku for neglecting her husband, though she never loved him. In her old age, recollecting her past life, she apologizes to her deceased husband repeatedly. She is found dead in the graveyard of her husband, extending her hand towards the cemetery of his.

DISCUSSION

Tagore's works are widely acclaimed for their profound philosophical, constructive ideologies, and very subtle representation of social reality. My paper attempts to analyse how Tagore's narrative gives vent to gender and disability, providing a lens through which rigid social prejudices can be discerned. Much of his writings depict his nuanced view of women bound between tradition and modernity. “Strir Patra” and “*Chokher Bali*” demonstrate his deep contemplation with questions of existential female identity and social expectation. However, very few of Tagore's stories discuss disability. Though some works portray physical or emotional disabilities, they rarely come within the purview of disability studies. By combining gender and disability, my paper identifies a multifaceted critique in Tagore's works, in which visual impairment, along with gender norms, becomes a source of resistance for the protagonist in “Subha.”

In Siraj's *Alik Manush*, we can see how Manirujjaman can lead a fulfilled life with the care and assistance of his family members. Although he faces problems because of his disability, indeed, his life would not have been much better than this. After all, his parents loved him; he was married off; he became the father of a son, as a normal person's life should be. But on the contrary, we find Subha as a victim of the patriarchal social structure. Her life would have been better if her parents had not considered her a burden; they would not have married her off to a distant city; if her husband had accepted her in his life, just like Ruku accepted her husband despite all his abnormalities. So, the seed of discrimination lies at the very core of the hackneyed psychological conviction of people regarding gender inequality. Beauvoir contends that women have always been perceived as weaker than men throughout history, as was depicted in Thomas Aquinas's work, where women are presented as “imperfect men” in the study of human anatomy. Consequently, “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to himself” (Beauvoir 11), and thus, women are driven to the marginal position, while men are thought to be strong individuals. Beauvoir claims that, despite having genetic disparities, women are made into women on account of societal conviction, leading her to conclude that biological facts are of less importance than social norms.

Here also comes Michel Foucault's notion of sexuality, which is developed by power-knowledge discourse, articulated by those who are in power: men. Foucault's work is central to power dynamics, its dissemination, circulation, and setback. It explains how power functions in each aspect of social structure. The idea of truth, honesty, and self-perception is directly connected to power. Though Disability Studies originates from the critical theory of Marxism at its core, it draws more from Foucault's work on mental illness. In Foucault's opinion, mental illness is a socially generated notion; rather than any health-related problem, labelling someone as affected by a mental disease in connection with that person's behaviour or feelings is a way of differentiating them from socially expected norms. Hence, the existence of mental illness has nothing as personal attributes but more with a socially constructed phenomenon. This, in a way, again, strengthens Judith Butler's argument, showing that individuals in power created

the idea of gender to construct a sexual hierarchy and affirm their authority and power. For that reason, the idea that one becomes a woman (although unwillingly) is backed because those in power have twisted the notion of women to safeguard their status, going against biological assertions of womanhood. Butler further argues that gender is a performance, a set of acts that are repeated and reinforced through societal expectations and norms. This performance is not based on biology or inherent traits, but rather on the continual repetition of gendered behaviour. Therefore, the idea of becoming a woman is not an innate or inevitable process but more a social norm that serves to maintain power dynamics and uphold patriarchal structures.

CONCLUSION

After investigating the systems surrounding individuals with disabilities, international disability studies scholars have come to realise that disability is not associated with the person but rather with societal constraints. (Fleischer) Disability Studies scholars stand up for assessing the life experiences of people with disabilities as they are presented and offered up as realities in literature, media, institutions, and social discourse. They draw attention to the fact that labelling any kind of disability creates a form of marginalization that turns out to be normative and accepted in society instead of being questioned. Disability studies call for raising the voice and perspective of people with disabilities and instigating the rest of us to listen patiently and understand them. (Connor)

Finally, it can be argued that gender is not something one is born with but something that is imposed and enforced by those in power. That is why deciphering and questioning such ingrained beliefs is critical to creating a wide-ranging and liberal society for every individual, irrespective of one's ability and gender. By introducing disability studies into the analysis of Bengali literature, my paper insists on a further open literary discussion that establishes disability not merely as an aesthetic component but as a perceptible experience worthy of inclusive discourse, thereby exploring a new vista on the dynamics of gender and stereotypes within cultural narratives. This paper encourages a more open literary discussion that accentuates disability not only as an aesthetic element but as a perceptible experience worthy of comprehensive examination. By introducing Disability Studies into the analysis of Bengali literature, new perspectives on the dynamics of power, gender, and stereotypes within cultural narratives are explored.

REFERENCES

- [1] Beauvoir, Simone de, editor. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2009.
- [2] Connor, David J. "The Disability Studies in Education Annual Conference: Explorations of Working Within, and Against, Special Education." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2014, pp. 1–26.
- [3] Crane, S.E.R. *Foucault, Disability Studies, and Mental Health Diagnoses in Children: An Analysis of Discourse and the Social Construction of Disability*. Lewis & Clark College, 2015.
- [4] Fleischer, Doris Z., and Frieda Zames. *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation*. Temple University Press, 2011.
- [5] Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Translated by Richard Howard, Random House, 1965.
- [6] Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1997.
- [7] Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2002, pp. 1–32.

- [8] Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept." *Hypatia*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2011, pp. 591–609. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01206.x>.
- [9] Hughes, Bill. "What Can a Foucauldian Analysis Contribute to Disability Theory?" *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, edited by Shelley Tremain, University of Michigan Press, 2005, pp. 78–92.
- [10] Kauffman, James M. *Education Deform: Bright People Sometimes Say Stupid Things about Education*. Scarecrow Education, 2002.
- [11] Michalko, Rod. "Double Trouble: Disability and Disability Students in Education." *Disability and the Politics of Education: An International Reader*, edited by Susan L. Gabel and Scot Danforth, Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 402–415.
- [12] Mukherjee, Sujata. *Tagore and the Empowerment of Women*. Sahitya Akademi, 2013.
- [13] Pattanayak, Chandrabhanu. "Rabindranath Tagore and the Emergence of the New Woman in Colonial Bengal." *Tagore and Gender: A Critical Perspective*, edited by Malashri Lal, Routledge India, 2014, pp. 88–102.
- [14] Siraj, Sayad Mustafa. *Alik Manush*. Dey Publishing, 2012.
- [15] Smith, Philip. "Cartographies of Eugenics and Special Education: A History of the (Ab)normal." *Disability and the Politics of Education: An International Reader*, edited by Susan L. Gabel and Scot Danforth, Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 417–432.
- [16] Snyder, Sharon L., and David T. Mitchell. *Cultural Locations of Disability*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- [17] Tagore, Rabindranath. *Galpaguccha*. Bikash Grantha Bhavan, 2004.
- [18] Tremain, Shelley. "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critical Disability Theory: An Introduction." *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, edited by Shelley Tremain, University of Michigan Press, 2005, pp. 1–26.

[Note: All the textual quotations of "Subha" and *Alik Manush* have been translated by me from the original text written in Bengali]



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons NC-SA 4.0 License Attribution—unrestricted use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, for any purpose non-commercially. This allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as the author is credited and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms. For any query contact: research@ciir.in