



## ***Silent Sufferers: Disabled Women's Portrayal in Subha and Vision by Rabindranath Tagore***



Dr. Preeti M. Gacche

Associate Professor

Department of English

Aryabhatta College, University of Delhi

Email: [preetigacche@aryabhattachcollege.ac.in](mailto:preetigacche@aryabhattachcollege.ac.in)

### **Abstract**

Disabled women occupy significant space in the Disability Rights Movement across the world. Yet, the issues of disabled women scarcely get sufficient representation and recognition. The lack of recognition of disabled women's issues arises out of the fallacy of regarding disability as a singular identity and that the issues of disabled men and women are the same. The disability studies scholars have strongly emphasized on the fact of disability being an intersectional identity which in combination with the identity markers like gender, race, class, sexuality, and castes, produces a unique subjectivity of a disabled person. The feminist disability studies is premised on the idea that disabled subjectivity is intersectional and always multiple. The scholars of feminist disability studies accuse the disability studies being overtly masculine as it accounts little for the embodied reality of living with impairment. Therefore, they suggest an articulation of the body apart from focusing on material exclusion in the social and physical environment.

In the Indian context, disabled women experience the sense of disenfranchisement and invisibility owing to

patriarchy, ableism, caste oppression, and poverty. Even the feminist spaces remain notoriously closed for the representation of disabled women. The disabled feminist scholars identify the three phases of the project of disabled feminism namely recovery, retrieval and reimaginings, in order to recover, retrieve and reimagine the female disabled subjectivity in all its complexity.

In a small attempt to recover disabled women's subjectivity in Indian literature, I venture to critically read into two short stories by Rabindranath Tagore namely *Subha* and *Vision* in order to understand the portrayal of disabled femininity so as to draw inferences about the perception of women in particular and disabled people in general in pre-independent India. I read these short stories as the instances of disability memoirs in compliance with the definition proposed by Paul de Man (1979) as well as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010). My reading of the short stories as disability memoirs will also allow me to investigate the agency as well as the practices self-representation.

**Keywords:** disability studies, feminist disability studies, ableism, inter-sectionality, impairment effects, disabled feminism, disability memoir

## RESEARCH PAPER

Disabled women occupy significant space in the Disability Rights Movement across the world. Yet, the issues of disabled women scarcely get sufficient representation and recognition. The non-recognition of disabled women's issues arises out of the fallacy of regarding disability as a singular identity and that the issues of disabled men and women are the same. The disability studies scholars have strongly emphasized on the fact of disability being an intersectional identity which, in combination with the identity markers like gender, race, class, sexuality, and castes, produces a unique subjectivity of a disabled person. For instance, according to Lenard J. Davis, "Just as the conceptualization of race, class, and gender shapes the life of those who are not black, poor, or female, so the concept of disability regulates the bodies of those who are 'normal'" (Davis, 1995: p. 2).

The feminist disability studies is premised on the idea that disabled subjectivity is intersectional and always multiplying (Hall, 2011: p. 1). The scholars of feminist disability studies accuse the disability studies of being overtly masculine, as it accounts little for the embodied reality of living with impairment. Therefore, they suggest an articulation of the body, apart from focusing on material exclusion in the social and physical environment. The concept of social model has undoubtedly revolutionized the idea of disability. Yet, sole dependence on socio-structural barriers may be insufficient for theorization of disability in all its complexities. Commenting on the social model, Jenny Morris points out, "While environmental barriers and social attitudes are a crucial part of our experience of disability- and do indeed disable us- to suggest that this is all there is to it is to deny the personal experience of physical and intellectual restrictions, of illness, of the fear of dying. A feminist perspective can help to redress this, and in so doing give voice to the experience of both disabled men and disabled women" (Morris, 1991: p.10). Likewise, spotlighting the impaired body, Carol Thomas states, "that some restrictions of activity may be directly associated with, or 'caused by', having a physical, sensory or intellectual impairment (not being able to do certain things because of the absence of a limb or the presence of chronic pain or fatigue, for example) is not ruled out- it is just that these are not 'disabilities'. Thomas refers to the limitations caused by impairment as 'impairment effects' (Thomas, 1999: p. 42).

The life narratives of the disabled women strongly give voice to not just the socio cultural dimensions of disability, but also raise the issue of disabled body, medicalization, issues of sexuality, desirability, marriage, and motherhood, thereby, theorizing the diversity in disabled feminine experiences (Mintz, 2007: np, introduction). Garland-Thompson notes that, "Disability life-writing repeatedly attests that adjusting to an acquired impairment is not as difficult as adjusting to the stigmatization and lowered social status that comes from moving into the community of the disabled. Virulent biases and negative associations discourage one from identifying as disabled. Accomplished women who have physical, mental, or psychological impairments not infrequently flee the category, sometimes proclaiming proudly that they are not "disabled". Nevertheless, a positive identity politics for women with disabilities is nascent, even though not as developed as the early black-is-beautiful racial politics, cultural feminism, or more recent queer pride movement" (Garland-Thompson, 2005: p. 1567).

As per 2011 census, in India, the disabled population amounts to 2.21 %, out of which 44% are women (1.18 crore). This number is ever on the increase, cutting across class, caste, rural or urban region (Goodley, 2011: p. 1). In the Indian disability scenario, a majority of disabled women experience the sense of disenfranchisement and invisibility owing to patriarchy, ableism, caste oppression, and poverty (Ghai, 2008: p. 220). In the urban areas many of the disabled women get educated and acquire employment on account of the reservations in the government jobs, as per the disability legislation, especially RPWD Act 2016, thereby, claiming their independence and financial autonomy. Some of the disabled women activists have also published their personal memoirs, claiming their unique disabled selfhood, restricted by inaccessibility and empowered by the human relationships at the same time (Gacche, 2023: p. 320). While exposing the physical and environmental barriers, these memoirs also carve out a proud disabled identity. On the contrary, the literature in India portrays disabled femininity in a very stereotypical manner, keeping in place the prevalent misconceptions and biases. Even the feminist spaces remain notoriously closed for the representation of disabled women. Anita Ghai observes that the issues of disabled women have been grossly overlooked by feminist scholars and activists (Ghai, 2002: pp. 57-58). Similarly, Nidhi Goyal maintains that in the academic arena the disabled women remain at the ultimate margins. Even the marginalized groups like Dalit women seem to regard the issue of disability as un-academic and un-theorisable (Goyal, 2018: p. 173). In fact, the possibility of coalition between disabled community and other marginalized groups can yield benefits favorable to both.

The disabled feminist scholars identify the three phases of the project of disabled feminism namely recovery, retrieval and reimaginings, in order to recover, retrieve and reimagine the female disabled subjectivities in all its complexities (Garland-Thompson, 2005: p. 1557). In a small attempt to recover disabled women's subjectivities in Indian literature, I endeavor to critically read into two short stories by Rabindranath Tagore namely *Subha* and *Vision* in order to understand the portrayal of disabled femininity so as to draw inferences about the perception of women in particular and disabled people in general in pre-independent India. I read these short stories as the instances of disability memoirs in compliance with the definition proposed by Paul de Man (1979) as well as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010). My reading of the short stories as disability memoirs will also allow me to investigate the agency as well as the practices of disabled self-representation. In his article "Autobiography as defacement", Paul de Man defines autobiography (memoir) as a mode of reading rather than being a literary genre. "Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution" (Man, 1979: p. 921). In addition to that Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their book "Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives", hold that life writing is a broader genre, representing life of oneself or another's, thus, taking a form of either a biography, novel, historic document or self-representative writings (Smith and Watson, 2010: p. 4). Taking these opinions in consideration, I read *Subha* and *Vision* as memoirs or life narratives. Also the fact of these stories being in the first person narratives has also drawn me towards analyzing them as memoirs. It may be noted that *Subha*, despite being a first person narrative, does not accord narrative agency to the speech disabled (mute) *Subha*. It is rather narrated by an unknown, 'omniscient narrator' (Booth, 1961: p. 213.). While the story *Vision* is narrated in a voice of "Kumo", a blind wife, thus, giving a disabled (blind) woman a narrative

agency and voice. By analyzing these short stories, I want to shed light on the ways in which disabled femininity is portrayed in the Indian literature, as historic records about disabled people's lives in general and disabled women in particular are unavailable to us (Anand, 2013: p. 47).

Both these short stories apparently positively stereotype the disabled femininity, by introducing a sympathetic narrator, presumably a man who stereotypes Kumo. The narrators of both the stories spotlight the disabled bodies of the protagonists rather than their femininity. The disabilities of Subha and Kumo occasion the drama of the stories (Mitchel and Snyder, 2000: p. 8). I will first look at Subha in order to understand the representation of a disabled woman in detail in detail in order to understand how a disabled woman is perceived, what is the attitude of the society, family regard disabled women? Then go on to Vision and try to understand what is the status of married women in the wake of disability in the Indian context, as both the stories revolve around the issue of marriage for disabled women. For Subha getting married is a struggle, while Kumo strives to save her marriage.

Subha's Invisibilising Silence:

The story Subha spotlights on the sense of isolation and invisibilisation of a speech impaired protagonist Subha. As both of her sisters were married of, Subha is depicted as "weighing as a silent weight on her parents" (Tagore, 2010: p.101). Apparently, the reason for Subha's parents suffering lies in their third daughter Subha's inability to speak which was none of her fault. Like her parents the rest of the village either ignored her or would say harsh words in front of her with little regard for the fact that she might hear and get hurt by them. This delegitimisation of Subha's personhood both by her parents and villagers forces her to consider herself as a curse, thereby, affecting her psychological wellbeing. This psycho-emotional disableism compels her to avoid any social interactions. However, Subha has two cows - Sarbhashi and Panguni - as companions. The animals are depicted to be quite compassionate and are capable of understanding her silent speech. "They had never heard their names from her lips, but they knew her footfall. Though she had no words, she murmured lovingly and they understood her gentle murmuring better than all speech. When she fondled them or scolded or coaxed them, they understood her better than men could do." (Tagore, 2010: p. 104). Further, Subha is depicted to be quite close with the dumb mother nature like rustling of leaves or the gargling of the stream are described to be making up for Subha's lack of speech. This association of Subha with the 'dumb animals' as well as the 'dumb nature' naturalizes her disabled femininity (Garland-Thompson, 2011: p, 18). The described similarity of her speech with the animals and with that of the nature undermines her humanness and negates her right to have social relations.

Subha's mother's constant irritation with her signifies disavowal of the disabled daughter. The disavowal of Subha's disability by her mother, is indicative of the mother's internalisation of the idea of deviant maternal imagination, so her irritation with Subha suggests her mother's efforts to distance herself from the blame of the society of that. She views Subha as embodying her own faults as a mother (Sildrick, 2002: pp. 33-35). Subha's proximity with Pratap, a loser in the eyes of villagers, symbolizes the desires of the disabled woman, negating the asexuality stereotype about disabled women. Subha often wonders to be of some help to Pratap. "And I think that, sitting and gazing a long while, she desired ardently to bring some great help to Pratap, to be of real aid, to prove by any means that she was not a useless burden to the world"

(Tagore, 2010: p. 106). Her innate desire to be accepted and acknowledged as a person is indicated by this quote, further emphasizing her social isolation due to negative attitudes towards her.

Further, the story throws light on the issue of marriage of Subha. One day when Subha is presented in front of a prospective groom, Subha's parents thought it unnecessary to inform him (groom) about her condition. Pathos is created in the story to depict Subha's silent plea through her loud cries. Instead her mother decked her up in ornaments and presented her in front of the groom. The groom took a long look and gave her assent for marriage, mistaking Subha's loud cries as 'a sign of soft heart', however, within ten days of the marriage the groom got remarried and got himself a speaking wife.

This instance of the story comments on the consideration that disabled women are unsuitable for marriage. At the same time it also can be interpreted as a commentary on looking. The groom's long look of Subha proves to be extremely unhelpful in his assessment of her. Thus, it casts doubt on the idea of taking a close look (Kleege, 1999: pp. 68-69). Thus, the story Subha attempts to retrieve the disabled femininity. It reveals the complete passivity and lack of agency to the disabled women. The naturalisation of her womanhood (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: p. 8) and disability highly dehumanises her. While the sympathetic tone of the narrator might be considered as positive representation, yet this sympathising attitude further helps in victimising Subha. The disabled women, thus, are victimised by patriarchy and ableism (Mintz, 2002: pp. 155-156).

#### Enclosed in her blindness: Vision and the question of Kumo

Contrary to Subha, Kumo has a narrative agency as a blind wife to narrativise her blind womanhood, as the story is narrated in her voice. Yet, in this self-narrated story there appears an abundance of stereotypical description about living with blindness. While giving birth to a dead child, Kumo's eyesight weakened which was a ready opportunity for her husband who was studying medicine to experiment on. Full of hubris, her husband Avinash began treating Kumo's eye himself, noticing this Kumo's brother (dada) who was studying Law interfered on Kumo's behalf to the great dismay and fury of Avinash. Avinash's treatment of his wife with half acquired knowledge of Medicine is symptomatic of the patriarchal norm that a woman is a property of a man (husband). Avinash's fury towards Kumo's brother displays his hubris in his half acquired knowledge.

Kumo herself is complicit in the ruining of her own eyes, as she resists her brother's intervention on her behalf, by saying "when my family had given me in marriage, they should not interfere afterwards. After all, my pleasure and pain are my husband's concern, not theirs" (Vision, [short-stories.co/@rabindranathtagore/vision-pqkln9dpyz24](http://short-stories.co/@rabindranathtagore/vision-pqkln9dpyz24) :np. ). She implored her brother not to interfere, thereby, claiming her agency as Avinash's wife. Kumo's views appear steeped in patriarchal notion prevalent in India that a woman steps out of the husband's house only after her death and that her family should not intrude in her matters.

As a last attempt, Dada secretly brought the doctor and bought the medicines only to be thrown in the well by Kumo. Although, successful in claiming her agency, Kumo lost her sight completely, because it was too late when Avinash brought an English doctor.

Totally guilt ridden, Avinash devotes himself to the care of his wife and the household chores, as a result Kumo experiences complete dependence on him, so much so that she felt to be hung in the midair without him. She describes, “Formerly, when my husband came back late from the hospital, I used to open my window and gaze at the road. That road was the link which connected his world with mine. Now when I had lost that link through my blindness, all my body would go out to seek him” (Vision, [short-stories.co/@rabindranathtagore/vision-pqkln9dpyz24](http://short-stories.co/@rabindranathtagore/vision-pqkln9dpyz24) :np). Here, Kumo emphasises her dependence on Avinash, but at the same time reveals the embodied nature of her experience of seeking him out, thereby, signaling the alternative experience of being in the world. However, her dependence on Avinash is more tragic and cumbersome to him, considering herself as a wife and a blind woman; thus, it appears that Kumo has internalized the stigma of womanhood and blindness (Campbell, 2009: p.22). She experiences her sense of growing distance between herself and her husband. This widening of chasm between them, according to Kumo, is caused by her blindness, thereby, signalling that her blindness is an encumbrance to her. Although, Kumo later mentions Avinash’s change of heart, she attributes it to money that he is acquiring rather than his social attitude caused by her blindness.

When Kumo broaches the topic of Avinash’s marriage to Avinash, he kisses between her brows and declared Kumo is his goddess and he couldn’t and wouldn’t bring another wife. At that Kumo reprimands him by saying he didn’t want to turn his house into the hospital for blind. Kumo stereotypically responds with elation that the third eye of wisdom is open for her, thereby, reinforcing the belief that blindness brings wisdom.

However, the entry of Avinash’s aunt along with a distant cousin Hemangini began to surface fresh doubts in Kumo’s mind about the impending marriage of her husband. She noticed his secret desire to wed Hemangini. Yet, at the end of the story it is Kumo’s dada wedded Hemangini, salvaging Kumo’s marriage. Thus, despite her narrative agency, Kumo is depicted to be utterly dependent on two significant men of her life. Therefore, her status remains that of a passive object rather than an acting subject (Causer, 2005: p. 604). Her blindness is presented as an impediment to her smooth marital life, however, at one point in the story she does admit that she could accomplish her household chores by the sense of sound, smell and touch. The growing distance between Kumo and Avinash raises the issues of blind woman’s desirability. Stereotypically the blind women are perceived as passive and pitiable, therefore, unsuitable to be wives. At one point Avinash comments in context of her blindness “you are as awful as the god. I only want a wife to chide, pet and fight” (Vision, [short-stories.co/@rabindranathtagore/vision-pqkln9dpyz24](http://short-stories.co/@rabindranathtagore/vision-pqkln9dpyz24) :np). These comments yet again highlight the secondary status of women. Further, it differentiates between a normal (seeing) wife and blind Kumo. Despite that, Kumo convinces herself that it is her constant prayers and faith in God has resulted in her triumph over her fate. In reality, it is Hemangini’s and dada’s joint efforts i.e., their marriage. It reestablishes her object status as a blind woman.

Thus, the life narratives of Subha and Kumo establish the intersection of patriarchy and ableism, rendering them as passive objects. Subha lacks voice and the ability to resist the fate brought upon her by her family and society at large. While Kumo successfully utilises her narrative agency to claim her similarity with the able bodied woman, but fails to embrace her difference. Marriage seems to be the key concern of both the narratives, for one the issue is to resist the forceful matrimony, for the other, the concern is to protect and preserve her marriage.

Both Subha's and Kumro's characters appear to be greatly influenced by the deep rooted Hindu beliefs in the Indian society which subjugates and victimises women and disabled persons. The issue of marriage is very much a part of feminist disability discourse which looks upon marriage for disabled women as an act of resistance against the charge of passivity.

## REFERENCES:

- Anand, Shilpaa (2013), "Disability rights and the Emergence of Disability Studies", in RenuAddlakha (ed.) *Disability Studies in India Global Discourses, Local Realities*, Routledge, New Delhi
- Booth, Wayne C.(1961), *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Campbell, Fiona Kumari (2009), *Contours of Ableism the Production of Disability and Abledness*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire
- Couser, G. Thomas (March 2005), "Disability, Life Narrative, and Representation", *PMLA*, 120 (2): 602-606, accessed on 02-04-2018, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486192>
- Davis, Lennard J. (1995), *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, Verso, London
- Gacche, P.M. (2023), *Selfhood and Women with Disability: A Study of Select Autobiographies*, an unpublished dissertation, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi
- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie (2011), "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory", in Kim Q. Hall (ed.) *Feminist Disability Studies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington
- Garland Thomson, Rosemarie (Winter 2005), "Feminist Disability Studies", *Signs*, 30 (2): pp. 1557-1587, accessed on 03/10/2015, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/423352>
- Ghai, Anita (2008), "A Disabled Feminism?" in Mary E. John (ed.) *Women's Studies in India A Reader*, Penguin Books, Gurgaon
- Ghai, Anita (Summer 2002), "Disabled Women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism", *Hypatia*, 17 (3) *Feminism and Disability*, Part 2: pp. 49-66, accessed on 18/08/2018, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810795>
- [Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan \(2000\), \*The Madwoman in Attic, The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination\*, Yale University Press, New Haven](#)
- Goodley, Dan (2011), *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, Sage Publication, London
- Goyal, Nidhi (2018), "Privilege or Marginalization: Narrative of a Disability Rights Activist" in Anita Ghai (ed.) *Disability in South Asia*, Sage Publications Limited, London
- Hall, Kim Q. (2011), "Reimagining Disability and Gender through Feminist Disability Studies: An Introduction" in Kim Q. Hall (ed.) *Feminist Disability Studies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington
- Kleege, Georgina (1999), *Sight Unseen*, Yale University Press, New Haven
- Man, Paul De (December 1979), "Autobiography as Defacement", *MLN Comparative Literature*, 94 (5): pp. 919-930, accessed on 22/09/2019, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2906560>

- Mintz, Susannah B. (2007), *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: chap. Introduction, accessed on 20/04/2019, URL: [www.bookshare.org](http://www.bookshare.org)
- Mintz, Susannah B. (Autumn 2002), "Invisible Disability: Georgina Kleege's "Sight Unseen", *NWSA Journal*, 14 (3): pp. 155-177, accessed on 02/04/2018, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4316929>
- Mitchell, David T. and Snyder, Sharon L. (2000), *Narrative Prosthesis, Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
- Morris, Jenny (1991), *Pride Against Prejudice Transforming Attitudes to Disability*, The Women's Press Ltd., London
- Shildrick, Margrit (2002), *Embodying the Monster*, Sage Publication, New Delhi
- Smith, Sidoni and Watson, Julia (2010), *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, accessed on 10/02/2019, URL: [www.bookshare.org](http://www.bookshare.org)
- Tagore, Rabindranath (2010), "Subha", in *Stories From Tagore*, The Project Gutenberg EBook, accessed on 7 August, 2024, URL: [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)
- Thomas, Carol (1999), *Female Forms Experiencing and Understanding Disability*, Open University Press, Buckingham
- Vision, accessed on 7 August, 2024, URL: [short-stories.co/@rabindranathtagore/vision-pqkln9dpyz24](http://short-stories.co/@rabindranathtagore/vision-pqkln9dpyz24)