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Cyborg identity for disabled women in India

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Abstract :

Technology is a crucial aspect of disabled lives. Both disabled men and women are users of assistive technology, thereby, acquiring a cyborg identity. The feminist scholars' celebration of cyborg identity for women presents a transgressive potential for women, thereby, liberating from the typical gendered identity, the disability scholars, however, problematize it on account of the pain, discomfort and so on while navigating the hostile socio-structural and cultural barriers.

I will look at the life writings by Malini Chib i.e., "One Little Finger", and Shivani Gupta's "No Looking Back". I will attempt to put these life writings in the perspective of disability technology and cyborg in order to outline the ways in which their female disabled bodies interact with the assistive technology. I will conclude, by complicating these identities by discussing the Indian scenario of in-access and un-accommodation. I will also point out the issues of embodiment in the context of use of assistive technology.

Key words: *Cyborg, assistive technology, prosthetic devices, gendered identity, disabled femininity, accessibility, accommodation*



Introduction :

In today's techno-centric era a majority of human beings seem to have adopted a cyborg identity, as all of us are hooked to either mobile phones, computers or other gadgets. Most of this mainstream technology is unavailable and unusable for the disabled people. Despite that technology is a crucial aspect of disabled lives. The technology used by the disabled people is called 'assistive technology' (AT) which is designed exclusively for enhancing the functionality and day to day living, for example white canes, wheelchairs, crutches, prosthetic limbs, cochlear implants, psychiatric drugs and other communication devices. All these technologies facilitate personal, professional, social and cultural lives of the disabled persons. Therefore, rather than being mere impersonal devices, they are loaded with emotions, values, symbolic and cultural meanings, both for the society and disabled persons, thus, acquiring the status of social objects and life of their own. Many a times, technology becomes the extension of users' bodies (Ravneberg and Soderstorm, 2017, pp.1- 3). Both disabled men and women are users of assistive technology, thereby, acquiring a cyborg identity (Reeve, 2012, p. 94).

As Dona J. Haraway defines, "a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction" (Haraway, 1991, p.149). For Haraway cyborgs present a potential to alter women's experiences. Its preference for production over reproduction liberates women from the strictures of heteronormativity. According to her, in the post-modern times the human bodies are chimeras, fabricated and theorized, deriving pleasure from the confusion of boundaries, simultaneously taking responsibility. Thus, Haraway constructs a social feminist culture and theory in the post- modern times in a non- natural way moving towards a post-gendered and post-genesis world. This post-gendered and post-genesis world rejects religion and patriarchy, by refusing to accept the idea of wholeness. It helps do away with the dichotomies of nature versus culture, men versus women, public versus private, animal versus machine, thereby, showing its commitment to irony, partiality and perversity. Thus, the idea of cyborg exhibits transgression of boundaries, potent couplings and dangerous possibilities by which world can be interpreted from the multiple points of views at the same time like many headed monster. Blurring the boundaries between self and the other, the cyborg hopes to pose challenge to the idea of a natural and whole human separated and elevated from the rest of



the things (Haraway, 1991, pp. 149-155). Haraway provides the examples of cyborgs as Asian women labourers and Hispanic women, and women of colour and paraplegics and other handicaps (Haraway, 1991, p. 174, 178). However, MaliniSchueller takes an issue with the idea that coloured and Asian women who may have been separated by specio-social contexts and might have little in common with that of Hispanic women protesting against nuclear power, even though, for both the group of women race would operate in different ways, as their juxtaposition lacks local situatedness (Schueller, 2005, p.81). Therefore, the exploration and possibility of a cyborg identity for disabled women in India needs to be located in the local socio-material reality (Rolestone, 2016, chap. one).

Haraway herself makes a brief mention of disability, stating, “perhaps paraplegics and other severely handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices”. Therefore, in this paper my attempt is to look at the viability of cyborg identity for disabled women in India. To do this I will make use of the ideas of disability and technology along with the ideas about impaired bodies.

The disability studies scholars in the west have explored the concept of cyborg in the context of impaired bodies, problematized it on account of pain and discomfort, but at the same time they have attempted to ‘crip the cyborg’ (Kafer, 2013, chap. 5). In this context, I will look at the disabled women’s life writings in the Indian context in order to understand how the disabled femininity negotiates and deals with their gendered subjectivity. For the purpose of this paper, I have chosen MaliniChib’s “One Little Finger”, and Shivani Gupta’s “No Looking Back”, as both these life writers embody severally disabled identity which has also been mentioned by Haraway as an example of hybrid identity. In India, disabled people are struggling for basic rights to survive (Ghai, 2006, pp. 88-89). Moreover, the technological and digital divide makes it difficult for many disabled people to acquire and use technology. Alongside, the social stereotyping of disabled people in general and disabled women in particular causes their social erasure. In this context, something like cyborg theory seems redundant and unnecessary for the disabled women in India. Yet, cyborg might prove a powerful identity for educated women to come out as disabled and also to instill confidence in their less fortunate brothers and sisters to do the same.



The disabled cyborg in the West:

The disability studies scholars in the western world are divided about the applicability of cyborg theory as a potential to alter disabled people's experiences. For instance, Tobin Siebers out rightly rejects the disabled body being even a cyborg. As he states, "Haraway's cyborgs are spunky, irreverent, and sexy; they accept with glee the ability to transgress old boundaries between machine and animal, male and female, and mind and body. They supposedly make up a future, fortunate race, but in fact they exist everywhere today. Our cyborgs are people with disabilities, and Haraway doesn't shy away from the comparison.....Haraway is so preoccupied with power and ability that she forgets what disability is.....To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled". What Siebers is trying to convey is that the use of prosthetic devices entails discomfort and pain and yet, the disabled person is completely helpless without them (Siebers, 2008, pp. 63-65). Besides, the disabled people are far more disenfranchised socially and politically to effect a potent transformation or to wield power. Alison Kafer, likewise, maintains that the use of prosthetic doesn't mean the seamless meld of body and the prosthetic device (Kafer, 2013, chap. 5). Moreover, becoming cyborg for the majority of disabled people even in the USA and the UK is hard on account of lack of or low employment (Kafer, 2013, chap. 5; Reeve, 2012, p. 95; Erevelles, 2011, p. 6).

Stressing upon the importance of socio-economic relations, Nirmala Erevelles questions the very idea of a transgressive body. It is impossible to conceive of a disabled body outside its historical materialist context. According to her, without the social and economic means, it is inconceivable to narrate or to re-constitute the body differently. What Erevelles is suggesting, in other words, is that becoming cyborg for a disabled body is determined by disability and it's social constitution of other identities like race, gender and sexuality re-constituted by transnational capitalism (Erevelles, 2011, pp. 7-13).

This economic concern also reflects in Dona Reeve's discussion of cyborg, crips and I-crips. She affirms to the reality of poverty for the disabled people, alongside lack of awareness, information about technology and the in-access of it. These and many other aspects become the impediment to acquisition of technology. Generally, these technologies are designed as one-size-fits-all (Cavalier, 1987, p. 333), many a times rendering them unusable for the disabled people, consequently leading to abandonment of the device (Ravneberg and



Soderstorm, 2017, p. 8). Moreover, the assistive technology is a visible sign of one's disability, as a result the technological devices represent social stigma. However, Reeve appears to be fascinated by cyborg's ability to transgress the boundary between normal and abnormal, thereby, promising the new idea of normal. This process of cyborgisation of the disabled is what Reeve calls 'I-crip'. The term I-crip signals a conscious adoption of cyborg identity, altering the naturalness of the body (Reeve, 2012, pp. 97-107). Even Kafer is strongly in favour of conscious cyborgisation, wherein, the consciousness building is directly related to the political actions, keeping in mind the complexities of melding bodies and machines and bodies and animals together (Kafer, 2013, chap. 5). The body theorist, Margrit Shildrick, argues for a potential of re-constituting disability activism, by combining bodies, culture and technology. She holds that the cyborg identity is an assemblage of circulation of desire, thus, a means by which the disabled body is liberated from the conceptions of lack. Her consideration of the disabled body as an assemblage brings about new connections and linkages, whereby, all kinds of existence are validated (Shildrick, 2017, pp. 138-141). However, her relinquishment of discourse of rights and equality as modernist concept poses a problem for the realization of transgressive border crossings in the non-western contexts of disability.

This theorization above appears to be more practicable in the developed world where the disability rights movement has succeeded a great deal in not just building consciousness about disability, but have also been able to effect socio-structural and attitudinal transformation. The majority that is the third world populated by more than 80 per cent disabled people and faced with the challenges like illiteracy, poverty, hunger, malnutrition, violence and lack of resources, the cyborg identity seems like a distant dream. In this context, I will briefly discuss the disability scenario in India with the help of disability life writings of the Indian disabled women who use technology. I will briefly discuss their own experiences while using the technology and attempt to theorize the lived reality of the cyborg life for the disabled women in India.

Exploring cyborg Identity for Indian Disabled Women:

As per the 2011 census, the disabled population in India amounts to 2.21 per cent of which more than 40 per cent is the number of disabled women which must have seen a greater surge in present time i.e., in 2025, as the total population in the present time is estimated to be 1.42



billion. Especially, in post-covid period, the number of disabled people across categories has certainly gone up. Despite their substantial number, the disabled women appear, by and large, invisible in social, cultural, economic, political and legal contexts. The PWD Act of 1995 failed entirely to cater to the concerns of disabled women, as it is thought as a gender less legislation on account of significant absence of civil and political rights (Dhanda, 2018, p. 388). The amended RPWD Act 2016 awaits a proper implementation, excluding the disabled people, especially women from benefiting from its provisions which not only recognize their personhood, but also grant them sexual rights which hitherto have been denied to them. NidhiGoyal remarks on a potential of the RPWD Act to effect a transformation, making disabled women a visible group legally which will gradually bring in change in the current status of disabled women (Goyal, 2017, p. 144).

While disabled people, in general, in India are still struggling with the fulfillment of basic necessities like food, health care, better living conditions and economic empowerment, the theories like that of the cyborg appear to be redundant. However, the conscious political actions of many disabled women, to my mind, are suggestive of their, what Kafer calls cyborgism (Kafer, 2013, chap. 5). The disabled theorists in the West, as stated above celebrate the cyborg identity by ‘cripping the cyborg’. The Indian disabled women, on account of lack of access and accommodation, have performed a cyborg identity by writing their own bodies into being (Mintz, 2002, pp. 155-156). This process of self-signification does much more than simply visiblising them. First, it alters the conception of female disabled body by incorporating the technological devices as an integral part of their embodiment, thus, creating an inter-corporeal identity which contests the image of a unitary and autonomous self. For instance, in the prologue of her memoir ‘No Looking Back’, Shivani Gupta boldly exhibits her cyborg identity, by depicting her dependence on both her chair and her personal carer Ritu. “The very thought of going out made me nervy and anxious- I was no longer used to such things, from the perch of a wheelchair.....Ritu, my caregiver, helped me get dressed.....It had become a familiar drill by now. It was nineteen years since I had become disabled, depending on a carer 24x7 to help me with just about everything. Ritu had been with us for nine of those nineteen years and now more a friend than a paid employee” (Gupta, 2014, pp. 1-2).

MaliniChib, likewise, writes about her dependency on her chair as well as her light writer and information technology. “I was now more adept on the computer. My power of



communication had improved considerably.....I used email all the time. To me, the email and light-writer boosted my confidence” (Chib, 2011, chap. 12). Both Gupta and Chib exhibit their cyborg status, implying themselves as strong disabled women, whose bodies do not end at the skin, thereby, altering the idea of corporeality to include human and technology interaction. Their assistants, both human and technological along with their bodies, are considered as one unit (Linton, 2006, p. 115) or an assemblage (Shildrick, 2017, pp. 139-140). Thus, their self-acceptance could be taken as what Erevelles calls ‘a severely disabled position’ (Erevelles, 2011, pp. 50-51).

This bold self-acceptance for both of them is a result of their struggle to come to terms with their bodily conditions because of which they faced exclusion, discrimination, objectification, and isolation. Through their life narratives, they have drawn attention to their particular issues which had made an impact to transform the disability landscape in the Indian context. Chib’s cyborg identity occurs in an accessible terrain of London where the disability consciousness has effected attitudinal transformation. Her work is important, nonetheless, as she navigates through multiple identities like race, gender and disability in London, of course, benefitted with her socio-economic class, at the same time, exposing the Indian disability scenario to be exclusionary and in-accessible. The available technological devices, as Chib describes, are totally unusable because of its slowness, compelling her to use human interpreters for faster communication. “My communication needs were not addressed until I was 13, which is when I was given a Canon Communicator. ...For me, using it was tedious and I preferred having an interpreter as it speeded things up” (Chib, 2011, chap.3). In college, Chib experiences exclusion, isolation and alienation as the Canon communicator is unable to keep up pace with rapidly changing communication of her college friends, impacting her social life as well as demonstrating that the assistive technology, on the one hand, facilitates inclusion and causes exclusion, on the other hand (Roulstone, 2016, chap. 1 & 2). Further, Chib faces stigmatization and patronizing attitude on account of her difference. For instance, at prom night while dancing with her friends using her crutches, she is patronizingly told to sit down, making the social event a misery for her. She starts questioning her sexual desirability and the idea of normal. “I wondered if there would ever be a man in my life. Would a man see beyond my body?” (Chib, 2011, chap. 6). Here the patronizing treatment meted out to Chib impacts her psycho-emotionally; consequently she lapses into thoughts of herself as an ungended body (Kafer, 2013, chap. 5). This kind of ungending is a direct consequence of crutches being the visible sign of her disability, resulting in stigmatization



(Parette and Scherer, 2004, p. 217). Such stigma of ungendering is also faced by Gupta. She writes about her experience in the streets of Delhi. “Each time I went out in Delhi, I was used to bystanders being curious about what had happened to me and feeling sorry for me and saying ‘Chhichhi! See, such a young and pretty girl in a wheelchair - who will marry her now?’” (Gupta, 2014, p. 76). Both the cases of Chib and Gupta demonstrate the dominant social view about disabled women. Their being on the wheelchair reduces them to object like bodies that are undesirable and unfit for marriage, as they become responsibility. This ungendering, however, is detrimental to the disabled women’s sense of self.

Often the human carer of the disabled person in India is the untrained poor women who for earning money accept such positions, resulting in strain in the relationship between carer and the caree, rendering the disabled person completely at the mercy of the caregiver, compromising the personal autonomy and the sense of privacy. Gupta details about her loss of autonomy and privacy.

Both, Chib and Gupta have contributed to building the disability consciousness in India through their activism. For instance, Chib strongly argues for not just the social inclusion, but also sexual rights for the disabled, by writing articles in the newspapers, for instance, No Sex for the Disabled for the Tribune, (September 2007) (Chib, 2011, chap. 12). Gupta through her work in the domain of access expands the idea of access beyond lifts and ramps to include other equipment for other disabilities, thereby, exhibiting a commitment to citizen-centric approach. Both their contribution paves the way for passage of first disability legislation in India. Thus, Gupta and Chib demonstrate the world changing potential of the disabled cyborg (Haraway, 1991, pp. 149-150; Kafer, 2013, chap. 5). Thus, they become Reeve’s I-crips (Reeve, 2012, p. 107).

The above discussion then in a way embraces the cyborg identity for the disabled women, but it is to be born in mind that both, Chib and Gupta, belonged to urban middle class and educated background. Thus, their gendered disabled identity in India is mediated through their socio-economic status which proves empowering for them.

However, a majority of disabled population in India reside in the rural part of the country where due to poverty, ignorance and illiteracy, assistive technology appears an unachievable goal. The usability of the technology becomes redundant due to in-accessible terrain.



Therefore, disability is regarded as a burden. So the dismissal of the concept of rights for the disabled as Shildrick holds is impossible in India.

In fact, I, as the beneficiary of the rights based approach to disability, able to critically engage with the idea of cyborg because of the education and accessible reading material. Though, I use technology, its breakdown makes me feel helplessly dependent on it. Consequently, I do not consider myself a cyborg because every day there is a flood of assistive technology, most of which for a blind woman like me, reinforces the conventional way of being in the world. The assistive technology has limited my creative and innovative navigation of adverse situations.

Besides, the cyborg identity for the disabled creates hierarchies in the disability community, giving rise to the image of the 'able-disabled' which is in line with the goals of neoliberalism. It creates a kind of technobлизм which is again exclusionary, as certain disabilities make it impossible even to use technology.

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