



THE REJECTED BODY: A CRITICAL READING OF DISABILITY AND DIFFERENCE IN LEELA GOUR BROOME'S FLUTE IN THE FOREST

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Abstract: This study addresses the difficulties endured by the disabled community due to the social factors that discriminate them as different. Narratives on disability provide an understanding about the socially and culturally constructed tensions on body. The concept of disability incorporated in children's literature can have a significant impact on the child who reads it. Such stories resonate the hardships that the individuals with impairments face and the strategies practiced by them to overcome the abusive nature of the society in which they reside. Published in 2010, Leela Gour Broome's *Flute in the Forest* unravels the life of a thirteen-year old girl named Atiya Sardare who was afflicted by polio. Atiya's mother abandoned her while she learnt about her daughter's physical condition. She was neglected, rejected, and ridiculed by many for the impairment that affected her at the age of five. On the other hand, her father being a forest officer encouraged her to lead a life closely associating herself with the enchanting beauty of nature. Residing by the suburbs of a forest gave her the privileges to go on treks even without her father's knowledge. Atiya found solace and peace during her secret expeditions to the jungle as she was more comfortable with trees and wild animals around her, than the derogatory and mean comments which her classmates imposed upon her. The story reveals how a child had to escape into the depths of forest to avoid social interactions that devalued her existence. Disability Theory by Tobin Siebers is used as the theoretical framework to get an insight about the nature of disability experience in a sociological and psychological point of view. This paper attempts to offer a critical understanding about the experiences of disabled community and how society needs to provide them a better space to live with equal liberty and freedom.

Index Terms - Disability, abuse, mean comments, forest, solace

Representation about the hideous facts of disability in children's literature enlightens the young readers to raise questions about the concept of disability and the difficulties encountered by the physically impaired children. This prompts them to think about the idea of normalcy as they discover differences within their lives when compared to the fictional characters from the texts that they read. Details of disabled community when exemplified through novels, educates the young minds to inculcate in them practices of equality. *Flute in the Forest* (2010), written by Leela Gour Broome narrates about the experiences of Atiya, a thirteen-year old adventurous spirit who finds solace in nature as the social space was not willing to accept her because of her physical condition. She was afflicted by polio at the age of five and it was then she had to witness and experience the dark side of human nature. Disability Theory (2008), by Tobin Siebers highlights the complex behavioural patterns of exclusion imposed on the disabled community by the society. It can be considered as a psycho-social reading that acts as an eye opener to the readers to avoid the stereotypical practices that generates pain to the disabled community.

In the novel, Atiya was not aware of the consequences that she had to bear when she contracted polio. She was enjoying her vacation with her parents at Uttarakhand, while the family realised that their daughter was sick. She had to battle for her life for a month while the doctors did their best to save her. Atiya survived but the doctors mentioned to her parents that her leg would never be the same again. The doctors also instructed that she would need calipers to prevent her from falling down. Little did she know that her impairment had caused embarrassment to her mother. Sarojini, mother of Atiya was fond of dance but she had to drop her career in dancing when she married Ram Deva Sardare, Atiya's father. When Atiya was born, Sarojini wanted to make her daughter to be the best dancer in the world. Their house resounded with carnatic music followed by the rhythms of footsteps as the mother and daughter in unison practiced each dance movements. But by realising the fact that Atiya could never dance as she was affected with poliomyelitis, Sarojini's hopes and dreams were shattered. She soon left her daughter and husband as the stage and dancing called her back.

Disability theory aims at addressing such issues to the society as it might help to transform the rigid ideas and concepts that they have regarding disability. Siebers mentions that the disability community does not have the liberty to live without stereotypes due to the social injustices. To disown or disparage a person because of his/her physical condition is not a politically or socially correct attitude in this progressive, developing, and democratic society. Every parent might have dreams regarding their children's life and future even before they are born. The usual statement during the period of pregnancy is that the parents are not bothered about their child's gender as long as the baby is healthy. Parents of children with impairments gradually think that their children can be vulnerable and tend to develop a complex that they will not be able to lead a life as other children. Here, Sarojini being a mother was forgetting the fact that Atiya could have had talents apart from dancing. Instead of staying by her side and watching her grow, she abandoned her daughter when she realised that Atiya will not be able to fulfil her desires.

As quoted by Siebers "Disability marks the last frontier of unquestioned inferiority because the preference for able-bodiedness makes it extremely difficult to embrace disabled people and to recognize their unnecessary and violent exclusion from society" (6). Sarojini found it difficult to embrace her own daughter as she was dejected by the fact that her daughter's body can no more function normally. Facing oppression from one's own home because of a physical condition that they have acquired suddenly is a source of injustice that indicates the lack of humanitarian qualities in human beings. Atiya had a childhood where she did not gain the love of her mother and she was also broken as her physical condition had separated her from Sarojini. At a very young age Atiya had learnt to fend for herself and she decided to utilise her time bonding with nature. Being a daughter of the Range Forest Officer, she had access to the nearby forest which was occupied by wild animals and tribal communities. Atiya was not afraid of these wild animals as she had been well educated with the secrets of forest and its inhabitants by her father. She found happiness spending her time amidst nature as she felt it is the safest parameter of interaction.

Atiya enjoyed her freedom among the enchanted beauty of forest as the social space where she resides was not willing to consider her as equal. She decided to follow the principles of her aunt who advised her "'Life,' she had once told Atiya, 'is full of "events". You can either spend your time with a weebegone face, resenting and regretting the sad and bad things that happen, or you can live through each "happening", thinking only of the positive and move on quickly to the next" (Broome 35). Rejecting social spaces because of marginalisation as followed by Atiya reflects the pain that a physically impaired person undergoes due to the restrictions that he/she has to face while he/she is marked as different. Apart from the abandonment and rejection faced within the family, Atiya was also exposed to many unpleasant experiences from her classmates because of her physical state. As articulated by Siebers, social exclusion is a reality that needs to be eradicated as it depicts the lack of access that a physically impaired individual has to his/her basic fundamental rights in the contemporary scenario.

Receiving appropriate support and attention from his/her loved ones will motivate an individual to tackle and surpass the troubles that he/she is undergoing. It brightens their life because of the confidence level attained from such actions of care. Prejudices and differences exist in all circles of human existence. Separating individuals based on their caste, creed, impairments, social, or economical status prevails all across the globe. A change to normalise all such actions is an inevitable criterion. A novel that depicts the incongruous actions reigning over humanity is an initiative that earnestly desires for a modification in the current political system. As mentioned by Siebers spreading awareness can initiate transformation to bring social justice that adheres to the basic needs of the disabled community. Such actions can limit the stereotypical notions and conflicts imposed on individuals with impairments by the mainstream society. Psychological fears are a result of the unjustifiable injustices levied upon them. Such sufferings jeopardise their confidence to act without worries in their future endeavours. Hence, proper attention should be given to the individuals with impairments as it enhances their resilience to stay strong and survive through the adversities that life offers them.

Atiya took her lessons from a nearby village school. Most of the children were very boisterous and they found happiness in making fun of Atiya by referring her as 'slow' and 'dim'. She found her school to be extremely monotonous as she was a regular victim to her classmates.

Their idea of fun was often to push and shove each other in the veranda outside their classroom. Atiya fell many times. The kids would watch her floundering away trying to grasp the furniture in her attempts at retrieving it from behind or under a distant desk. She soon became the butt of all their jokes. Because her reactions were much slower than theirs, they called her slow and dumb. (Broome 9)

Though such references were made, in reality Atiya was ahead of them in class as she always excelled in science and geography. She had a natural talent in learning these subjects as while her father bring his friends home; their conversations were based on their expeditions all over India. This will also be followed by projecting slides of captured pictures after they have their dinner. But the horrifying experiences that she had to deal with due to the adverse behavioural patterns of her classmates pushed her to flee away from the social space, to the jungle where she was free from hatred or discrimination. She decided to disconnect from society to reconnect with nature as, for her, forest was the symbol of peace. "She was more comfortable with trees and wild animals around her, than with scores of loud, yelling, teasing children" (Broome 3). Atiya enjoyed the tranquillity of the environment and it also helped her to have strong will power. Though she felt her strength drained in such expeditions, each journey revitalized her.

A good living environment provided by the members at school could have helped Atiya to gain self-assurance without searching for alternate sources of help. Having a good and reliable friend, teacher, relatives, or parents will help an individual to grow out from their fears and insecurities. Good interactions that accept an individual the way how he/she is serves as an important factor for the successful development of that person. A change can be seen if children are enlightened with informations regarding the minority groups that the mainstream society has excluded according to their convenience. Such brutal exclusionary behavioural attitudes can be avoided among the future generations if proper guidance and knowledge is provided to all equally. If the school curriculum is designed by raising issues and providing the details about the disabled community, it too

can be the catalyst to bring changes in the existing rules. Children are mostly unaware about many issues that are happening across the nation. Providing awareness about such contents helps them to realise the seriousness of a particular issue and act accordingly without being a reason of pain to another individual. They can rather bring about changes that will be of help to improve the living condition of their peers. Initiatives like this will eradicate the sufferings that children like Atiya had to endure at a very young age. A better tomorrow can be created by actions of justice that are taught to the children at their right age.

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