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## Dismantling the Normative: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)

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**Abstract:** The hegemonic structures which establish themselves on the basis of 'Othering' use the human body as one of the primary tools while creating this distinction. Skin color, size, appearance, linguistics and other physical aspects have, in most cases, proved to be the most important tools used by those in power to create the division while generating a feeling of submission within the subaltern. One such discrimination which was not even a critical discourse till post-1970s is the segregation of persons with disabilities. While other differences have now been significantly refashioned as the potentiality of alternative modes of being, social constructivism continues to resist including disability as an alternate becoming. The majority of our extant critical theories have continued to ignore disability in their theories of queer, gender, racialized, classed, sexualized, environmentalist and intersectionalist approaches to questions of embodiment.

Literature has engaged with the idea of the body being the nucleus of discrimination since centuries. The existence of 'non-normative' characters in many epics, plays and novels serves as proof of that. A novel that deals with the 'What is normative?' debate, as early as in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Among one of the most widely read books around the world with multiple theatrical and cinematic adaptations available, *Gulliver's Travels* is hardly ever been interrogated from the disability perspective. Through the dreamlike experiences of the protagonist Gulliver, the novel establishes that an individual's appearance is not governed as much by their bodily differences as by their socio-cultural placement. When placed within an alien environment, Gulliver's normativeness is disrupted and the distinction between normal and non-normal gets blurred. The paper will closely examine *Gulliver's Travels* from the lens of Disability Studies to academically establish that 'normal' is a hegemonic construct.

### Index Terms - Disability, Binary, Othering, Normative, Hegemony, Eighteenth Century

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* has been read as a satire, as children's literature, a travelogue, fantasy fiction, a science fiction, from colonial perspective and many other recognized discourses. Surprisingly though, rarely does one hear of it as one of the earliest novels exploring the discourse of disability at the grass roots level. By questioning the construction of 'normative', Swift's text not only dismantles the binaries between 'abled' and 'disabled', but also, in its own way, establishes the 'abnormal' as a social response to deviation from the normative. My presentation closely examines *Gulliver's Travels* from the lens of Disability Studies to academically establish that the 'Normal' is a construct.

Across ages, disability has been viewed under various typified views ranging from divine curses, stock representations, comic reliefs to passive, pitiful persons in need of rescue from the able-bodied. In literature, disability representations date back to the time of classical folklores and epics. The tales of Tiresias (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), Oedipus (Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*), Shakuni (Vyasa's *Mahabharata*) and Manthara (Valmiki's *Ramayana*) provide enough evidence to substantiate that divine punishments or rewards for villainy or virtuousness is the primary cause for a person's disability. The motif of 'karma' attached to a disabled character is more prominently visible in later ages, for instance, the character of Richard in Shakespeare's *Richard III* who is "not shaped for sportive tricks" but rather is "deformed, unfinished, sent before my[Richard] time" and is "determined to prove a villain"(Barker). Similarly, *The Madwoman in the Attic*<sup>1</sup> kept chained in the house of Mr. Rochester, who is widely read from the discourse of gender studies, has rarely been studied from the perspective of disability. However instead of focusing on the lived experiences of those with disabilities, the focal point has generally been to employ representative strategies to present disability as a stock feature of characterization as well as an opportunistic allegorical ruse.

Disability theorists David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder explain this neglect through the concept of 'narrative prosthesis' which provides "that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potency, and analytical insight" (224). They go on to state that unlike the absence of other distinctions like sex, race, or caste from literature, the disabled body has always been present in literature as a contrast to the normative: "disabled peoples' social invisibility has occurred in the wake of their perpetual circulation throughout print history." (Mitchell 226).

<sup>1</sup>Gilbert and Gubar draw the title of their book from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, in which Rochester's wife, Bertha Mason is kept secretly locked in an attic apartment by her husband.

Before going into the understanding of deviation or difference, it is extremely important to understand the forces behind the construction of the 'normative'. In their book, *Exploring Normativity in Disability Studies*, Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas mention that "...disability both as a phenomenon and as a concept is in its essence normative; it expresses normative ideas and assumptions concerning what kinds of capacities or possibilities people should have or be afforded in order to lead a good life, and/or how society ought to be organised in order to treat its members equally and fairly." By totally inverting the whole concept of what defines the normal or, in fact, whether or not a normal is even definable, *Gulliver's Travels* breaks every sense of normality. On the surface, the novel traces the adventures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century pragmatic voyager Lemuel Gulliver, while within the same, it subverts human anatomy and exposes the structural constructs surrounding the superiority of man as the image of God himself.

Unlike older times, by the 18th century, persons with disabilities were not looked down upon as being divinely penalised or segregated due to their physical attributes. They weren't mentally disabled due to the sins of their forefathers, neither did their visual impairment grant any celestial wisdom and predictive powers. There was a shift in the understanding of disability from the classical allegorical model to the medical model. New explanations were emerging which questioned the ancient notion of divine or supernatural forces causing a deformity or cosmic mis-happenings creating disability within a person. Odd behaviour of disabled persons was no longer looked at as a cosmic significance or the possession of their soul by evil spirits but through the logical reasoning of a medical cause and subsequently, the search for ways of treating the same. The disability model shifted from being charity-based to being scientifically-explored. Henri Stiker observes that "thinkers were looking to a natural sequence of events and no longer to a moral one" (93).

Persons with disabilities were present at all levels of the society, from street-side alms-beggars to established painters and musicians in the royal Court. Most of the disabled people usually presided in their own houses and communities. If they were well-off, they would marry comfortably and support themselves, and if they weren't, they would hope to receive help from the better-off in the society. Subsequently, with the expansion of population and restriction of spaces, the idea of a specific institution for the disabled individuals who were unproductive and incapable was created for people who were 'different'. These differently abled people gradually became a class to be removed from the "able-bodied" society.

In the introductory part of *Gulliver's Travels* itself it is established that Gulliver typifies the bourgeoisie gentleman on a voyage to seek a fortune. But the moment he discovers the Lilliputians with their six-inch heights, he is the one with the deviance. His appetite, his appearance and even the amount he excretes is ginormous to them. The Lilliputians think of Gulliver as a giant who could be tamed and used as a war weapon in times of need. Separating the definition of normative from Gulliver's body, it is now attached to the Lilliputians for whom, Gulliver is the giant to be made spectacle of.

However, this othering works both ways as, for a long time, Gulliver's stubborn belief in his normativity does not allow him to accept the reality around him as the truth and thinks of it as a superficial novelty. Dennis Todd indicates that in doing so, Swift perhaps resorts to the utilization of a narrative prosthesis throughout the novel: "Swift makes...the popular diversion of monster-viewing the imaginative center of *Gulliver's Travels*" (148). Gulliver, living under the constricted illusion of being the normal, does not visualize beyond the external appearance and physicality of the beings he encounters throughout his journeys. He is engaged in as much monster-viewing as the Lilliputians, and this is perhaps why instead of engaging with their views, Gulliver merely notes down their ideas like a dispassionate observer. Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues that those who engaged in activities of monster-viewing are unable to distinguish the 'monsters' beyond their corporeal bodies: "[f]reaks and prodigies were solely bodies, without the humanity social structures confer upon more ordinary people" (57).

In the second part of the novel, when Gulliver arrives at Brobdingnag, the definitions of normative are again inverted. Almost instantly, Gulliver passes a judgment on the Brobdingnagians simply on the basis of their size: "[f]or, as human Creatures are observed to be more savage and cruel in Proportion to their Bulk; what could I expect but to be a Morsel in the Mouth of the first among these enormous Barbarians who should happen to seize me?" (94) Ironically, Gulliver is discriminating the giants on the basis of their sizes while he himself is an object of segregation from the normative among the Lilliputians. In the incident where Gulliver is put on show out of the carriage window, it seems as though the Brobdingnagians are using Gulliver as a tool to confirm their own 'normality'. In Lilliput, Gulliver is 12 times larger than the natives, and in Brobdingnag, 12 times smaller. A vacant temple has to be found to house him in Lilliput, and a special box is manufactured as his home and means of transport in Brobdingnag. In both places he is a misfit, an abnormality.

In Book three, Gulliver comes across the *Struldbruggs* who are almost immortal—they lose their hair, teeth, memory, and even the ability to communicate—they eventually become disabled and monstrous. While acknowledging the condition of the *Struldbruggs* as a sheer unlucky occurrence, he is not sympathetic towards their sufferings. Rather he is of the view that the *Struldbruggs* were "despised and hated by all sorts of people: When one of them is born, it is reckoned ominous, and their Birth is recorded very particularly" (Swift, 199). The *Struldbruggs* are despised by Gulliver, at least partially, due to their physical appearance:

They were the most mortifying sight I ever beheld; and the women more horrible than the men. Besides the usual deformities in extreme old age, they acquired an additional ghastliness in proportion to their number of years, which is not to be described. (Swift 199)

However, the cause behind the aversion for the *Struldbruggs* is never explored by Gulliver in detail. Todd writes that Gulliver "desires to know monsters, but he must manage what he knows about them in order to defend himself against the humiliating knowledge they offer about himself" (155). The 'humiliating knowledge' referred to here is the fact that even with their deviant, non-normative appearances, the *Struldbruggs* are human beings, much like Gulliver himself. Heider discussed man's negative reaction to what he perceived to be different and unfamiliar. Cognitively unstructured, and therefore unfamiliar, 'situations tend to threaten the person whose expectations of what should be the structure of the life space are not being met. This leads the person to withdraw from such a situation (avoidance).

Pointing towards the signs of dispositional disability being exhibited by Gulliver, Christopher Gabbard writes:

while it cannot be said that Gulliver lives with an intellectual disability resembling any present-day diagnosis, he does answer to a dispositional disability that would have been recognized by the doctors of his own time. Gulliver exhibits a dispositional impairment known among physicians as "mobilitas opinionum or instability of opinion". (Goodey 228-229)

Gulliver's mental instability causes him to unknowingly portray certain irrational behavioural traits. He is no longer a 'man of sound mind and judgement' and can never come to terms with his similarities with the Yahoos, as unlike the Houyhnhnms, they are savage and animalistic according to Gulliver. In the incident of tracks, he can never comprehend that the Yahoos possess the intelligence of creating tracks for themselves and keeps superimposing the existence of humans in that island. In fact, the Houyhnhnms, who are normalized and admired by Gulliver for their reason and intelligence are horses and not humans. There occurs 360 degrees shift in

Gulliver's beliefs while determining the traits of the normative body—from bodily appearance to intellectual capacity. This shift is so intense for Gulliver that he wishes to embrace their identity and become one of them, renouncing humanity.

*Gulliver's Travels* can be read as one of the earliest disability texts and, without as much as putting the lens of disability studies out in the open, Swift amalgamates the disability perspective by interrogating the multiple constructions and deconstructions of the 'normative' within the novel in a satirical yet deeply impacting manner. The novel not only disposes of bodily differences as the only cause for disablement, but also identifies intellectual and mental deviances as important catalysts in this discrimination. At a time when mental and intellectual disabilities were still a decade from being discovered and accepted by the society, Swift's text offers a window to opening our minds to the possibility of rereading of the text from the prism of disability.

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