



Understanding the Relations of Religion and Disability: A Study of Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* and Naseema Hazruk's *The Incredible Story*

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the relation between "disability" and "religion", through the reading of selected Indian disabled women life narratives such as *The Other Senses* and *The Incredible Story*. Unlike others, the life of a "disabled" is determined by the family they are born into with different religions, caste and class. In India, other than the common assumptions of disabled persons as being dependent and incompetent in society, the contrasting views on the difference between disabled men and women can be discursively rooted back to Hindu mythologies. Religion also set certain duties to be performed by an individual to fulfil their birth as women and men. Preeti was born in a Sikh family; her disability influenced her life in the events of marriage and her familial role. On the other hand, Naseema was born in a Muslim family, who is already living as a marginalised in her daily life, goes on facing discrimination even when she reaches great heights as disability activist in the name of religion. This paper examines how life writings by disabled women challenge these stereotypes prevalent in Indian society. It is primarily because of certain preconceived notions about 'ableism' and disability that give way to these stereotypical formations. I speculate, while we do not have major narratives dealing with or reflecting the real-life experiences of disabled community; the ones which exist are either brushed under the carpet or are appropriated as part of certain political strategies. At the same time, this paper studies the crucial import of a religion in which a disabled is born into and the ways the religious practices come to endorse certain myths and stereotypes even firmly, making the lives of disabled more miserable.

Keywords: Life narratives, Disability and Religion, Disabled Women and Disabled life narratives

Disabled men and women are always considered to be dependent and unskilled in society. This thought is strongly rooted in the minds of the masses that the disabled body is useless and a burden to society. In India, Hindu texts created the supremacy over the idea of disability that it is the result of *Karma palah*. In the Hindu religion, a person is believed to have several births. It is strongly believed that this birth is a result of the deeds of previous birth. Even Hindu mythological scriptures like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatham* mention about disability. In *Mahabharatham*, Dhritarashtra is denied the throne stating the reason that he is not eligible to perform kingly duties because of his visual impairment. This shows that idea of being disabled and born with impairment has no space in religion. The society, from its roots, has strongly nailed the thought of the disabled person as someone out of place within the social framework through its religious preaching and customs.

“Historically in India as elsewhere in the world, there has been a deep-rooted cultural antipathy to persons with disabilities. Throughout the ages the disabled have been looked down upon with disdain, almost as if they were sub-human. They have been portrayed as medical anomalies, helpless victims and a lifelong burden on family and society.” (Addlakha, 2011, p. 9).

One knows that there is bias in the treatment of men and women. Likewise, there is a difference in impairment hierarchies too. These hierarchies are based on how a person can handle his day to day life with the impairment; for instance, blind can't see but he can do the maximum of his daily activities through proper assistance and guidance. The person who has no mobility and has to rely on someone's help for his every single move comes to the bottom level in the scale of the disabled. There is also a variation in the life of disabled men and women due to the difference in gender, attitudinal and biological differences. The identity of the disabled is projected as a sympathetic being, dependent and unsightly. This idea of disability can be traced even in Hindu mythology, Ramayana, Manthra, a humpbacked woman, who was wicked and antagonistic in appearance, was responsible for the exile of Rama. On the other hand, in *Mahabharatham*, Dhritarashtra, a visually impaired and Shakuni, an orthopaedic is portrayed as a ruler despite their disability. There is bias in portraying disabled men and women even in the epics. The society has strongly stuck to the afflictions of epics. It started portraying the disabled as beggars and sinful beings in media. For instance, in Tamil movies, a visually impaired man is shown as the hero of the movies but the portrayal of disabled women is still as pity characters. *Kasi*(2001) portrays how a poor blind man suffers to settle his family issues through his daily earnings. In this movie, he earns his daily bread by singing under a tree in a market place. *Nan Kadavul*(2009) depicts how the physically and mentally challenged are used by an individual for his own benefits as beggars. In the same movie *Hamasavali*, a visually impaired girl is shown as a beggar who asks a *Agori* to relieve her from the misery of this sinful life. *Thandavam*(2012) shows how visually impaired men use his aural sense to take revenge of his wife murder. These instances show how the disabled men as heroes and women as not heroines but only as characters of pity in the media holding to the influenced idea of epics.

One always tends to think that disability is within the self. The disabled self is just impaired body but the society fails to accommodate the individual by not providing him space and opportunities. The following definition will acknowledge the idea. The notion of disability is a social construct, rather than just referring to the physical and mental disadvantages an individual faces on a personal level, as exhibited by the 1982 definition adapted by Disabled People's International (DPI):

Impairment is the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental, or sensory impairment. *Disability* is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers. (Goodley, 2010, p. 8).

I use this fundamental definition of disability to understand the social construct of disability fraught with gender discrimination documented in the selected texts. By discussing the autobiographical works of women writers, the arguments will furthermore focus on the concept of double oppression from the social and individual perspectives. I also want to bring an argument that religion is also a social construct in a sense that after one's birth, name, nationality, sect and religion are fixed. The individual doesn't have any liberty of choosing it rather one is made to live with the identity given and carry it lifelong. There is a chance to

make a shift in one's identity when one wishes to but during this process individual has to undergo the traumatic experience of dissemination and segregation in life.

If one has to talk about religion, one should always remember that religion is not a singular construct. Religion comprises of caste within itself, caste leads to endogamy. That is how religion and caste survive even in this 21st century within the vicious cycle. How caste is still alive in India. It is always levied on an individual by society. In India, the *Varna* system defines an individual's profession based on the caste to which he is born. It decides what he/she as an individual in the society is supposed to do. One's profession reveals what their caste is. So the sense of individuality is lost in the Indian society. From one's birth to death he/she live as an individual with the identity which society imposes on them. In India, the identity of an individual is never created by his own; an individual is just a depiction of what the society wants him to be. For instance, if one is born in Valmiki (a group of people who do scavenger as their job) community, society brands him with his profession that he is the son of a Valmiki and always forces him to stay in the same strata of the society for its own benefits. Society always stands as a block to his development because if he quit the job of scavenging there will be no substitute to do the job so he always lives with an identity that is forced upon him. When Hindus thought of converting to other religion so that it would help them to come out of their terrible life it was of no use. They carried their caste identity with them as a result of which they remained as Dalit Christian and Dalit Muslim, even in their converted religion, caste of the former religion become their identity. Thus, conversion to another religion was not the ultimate solution for their sufferings.

It is essential to look at views about the disability on other religions too. Hinduism says that disability is caused by your past sins, *karma* and Buddhism also subscribe to the idea of disability as a result of past sin. Christianity sees disability in two ways one is due to sin. Certain verses from The Holy Bible suggest that disability out of sin and recovering from disability is forgiveness of sin, "Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven" (*New International Version*, 1973/2011 Mathew. 9,2). "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (*New International Version*, 1973/2011, Mark. 2.5) and "When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." (*New International Version*, 1973/2011, Luke. 5.20). On the other hand it is also seen as the result of that God's work on an individual.

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. (*New International Version*, 1973/2011, John 9.1-3)

Islam has no mention of the disabled in Qur'an. This clearly shows that Islam has no space for impaired bodies. Later it developed the concept that it is a challenge set by Allah for one's survival. Judaism has a view that the disabled are created by *Yahweh* (God), as a punishment for transgression. Impaired bodies are always seen as the result of wrongful acts which one has performed in his previous birth. It fails to accept its scientific aspect that impairment is due to accident and genetic disorders rather it stigmatizes the individual and family as sinners to god. This stops the development phase in the life of disabled. Some families are not even ready to bring their child to the outer world because of the sinner and sinful ideas. Some just want to get rid of their disabled children by killing or leaving them in roads or orphanages.

Anuradha Mohit (1996) writes about the condition of disabled woman as:

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Women face triple discrimination because of disability, gender, and economic status. Prejudice prevail even within the three categories among women, disabled women are seen as inferior, resulting in isolation and marginalization. They become the poorest of the poor. (26)

The above lines clearly state who is a disabled woman in society. That disabled woman face marginalization in society. The life of a Hindu Dalit disabled women is not as same as Muslim Dalit disabled women because the religious treatment of women differs, the household customs and the social construct of being a Hindu and Muslim will differ which will make woman life doomed. Apart from economic status, every religion has its own culture and rituals. The views of perfect men and women change across cultures. Likewise disabled men and women are not treated equally across culture and society. Some disabled women are just locked indoors, they grow up without even knowing what education or the outer world is beyond the four walls, some just lead their life in the hands of pseudo-Godmen for miracles to happen in their life by overnight, some are so lucky to get their education and job of their dreams. As religion constructs its own culture and norms, the life experience is not the same for every disabled woman. This paper will talk about how religion influences the life of the disabled and how disabled women faces issues due to religion.

Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* narrates her experiences of visual impairment in her childhood days, abuses faced by her in marriage life and how hardships in life shaped her destiny to be successful in life as an aerobic trainer, public speaker and director of a company. Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* will be examined to show how the stereotypes of the society are broken in her life narrative to construct the identity of the visually impaired community by and large. Preeti Monga lost her vision in childhood days. This book is about how being a woman she managed her childhood with a disability, her adolescent days as a young woman and how she moulds herself with the disability as a successful person today. Preeti was born in a upper class Sikh family, which actually opened the doors for her opportunities. Her early childhood days are spent in northeast, later she had completely urban based life.

In the hands of religion, Preeti(2012) has faced two extremes in her school days. The first one was 'my parents told the principal, Sister Clara, plus the few adjustments they might make in school forsake' (43). These lines show that her parents tried to provide her education which is still out of the way for the girls with visual impairment. When disabled are considered to be sign of sin, disabled girls are always pictured as sinners of the sinners. In this patriarchal setup, a girl should be married and sent away from home. She has no rights in her parent's house anymore, after it has changed through various amendments legally. Sponsoring on disabled girl for her growth and development is considered to be the money thrown in water because the question of who will marry her always dooms her future and society always tends to discourage the parents that no one is going to marry her. Why to spend much on her, she is just a burden to your life was hammered every now and then by some or other.

Education in a normal school suggests that the visually impaired can be provided through integrated schooling. It gives the scope for the community about schooling. In the next few pages, there is a big shock in her life 'why then was the only one picked upon dismissal from school?' (Monga, 2010, p. 45) The school where she pursuing here studies has denied her admission when principal sister Clara was transferred. The reality that visually impaired are denied opportunities due to their disability is shown. To add on this, the religion

which says love your enemies has no love for disabled. When Sister Clara with kind hearted made special arrangements to accommodate a visually impaired was shattered in moments when the authority changes. So, what religions preach us be kind to fellow humans and love your enemies and neighbours doesn't works in reality. There is always a gap between preaching and practicing the values of a religion. One will be saying impairment can be treated with the help of black magic but he will be the one who will be taking medicines for his own illness. In Preeti's life, the school principal tried to help her but the other person stops it. Charity should begin from heart and no religion in the name of god can bring that change, only humanism can do it.

Society always surprises over the capabilities and the talents of a disabled. It always stereotypes that visually impaired can only sing. They don't pose any other skills. Preeti's (2010) lines come as a backlash to the thoughts of the narrow minds. 'Swimming and dancing is now, for me, as a potent drug and "what will people think or say? Never bother me. I have even, won few prizes on the dance floor' (65). Disabled girls are considered to be asexual and they don't have value for them in the marriage life. Apart from the thought that disabled are asexual, they are also considered to be as incapable of satisfying normative feminine roles as mother, daughter and wife. They don't meet stereotype standards of women in appearance, questioned about having a healthy child and performing household chores. This always led them to dark cloud in the events of marriage. They are forced for second marriages and even after marriage they face abuses and violence for which even their family is least bothered.

In a religious setup, marriage has become a norm of the Indian society. In Indian marriages lakhs of money is spent to show the culture of the particular set of people. It is performed with lot of rituals in it. But in life of disabled women, they are always seen as burden to be relieved from the family. There is also class (economically) pressure that forces the parents to get them married off to someone who is not even good in his character though. In Preeti's life, 'the proposal for the marriage happens in a way that the prospective bridegroom was a Sikh air force officer who was looking for the second wife after his first has left him for reasons unknown! He was ready to marry me notwithstanding my disability' (Monga, 2010, p. 85). Who knows that he is getting married to Preeti for the reason that she is disabled on sympathy or empathy grounds? If then why he was not ready to marry her as a first wife?. This clearly shows that in the norms and eyes of society, one has to get married to show that they lived their life completely. This IAF officer is trying to prove his masculinity to show that he is married and leading a family life. So the marginalised (poor and disabled) women are just seen as prey for his pride and prestige. The disabled body is always considered to be inferior to the normal. The above lines show they were ready to get her daughter married to a man who has married before. If the daughter was normal, the same discrimination will not happen to a girl in upper-class family. Since Preeti(2010) was blind this injustice happened to her. 'You can imagine my shock when I heard the news that my so-called prospective bridegroom was at the time on his way to marry another woman at Patila' (86). This line speaks the reality that the able bodies reject the disabled ones as their life partners.

When religion based marriages had the complexities of their own, disabled women faced hardships in choosing their love of their life. One can't always be sure of making right choices. There is a chance for choices can be a big mistake of your life. Preeti has got married to his Christian love, Keith. As seen earlier there is always a gap in preaching and practising the religion. If every religion says have love for fellow humans why the world today suffering with war and poverty. If one is not human, what is the use of identifying oneself as religious person? Preeti met the love of her life, Keith. She writes about his encounter in her life as ' he loved me for what I was and hadn't ever known a family as simple and loving as ours, and

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wished for nothing more in the world than to be part of it' (Monga, 2010, p. 95). When she got married the reality was completely different. He was lazy unemployed and drunkard who made her marriage life troublesome and filled with physical and verbal abuse every day.

I was even made fun of ; Keith would hand me an empty plate after rattling an empty spoon on it, then urge me to eat, saying with sarcastic mirth 'Here eat!' and when I put my hand on the plate searching for the food, he could have a hearty laugh... Hey you blind bat, he would yell. (Monga, 2010, p. 104-105)

Being in an upper class of the society, Preeti's mother wanted her daughter to be more devoted to the husband even knowing that she faced abuse in her daily life. As any typical Indian woman, Monga bears the domestic violence by Keith for the well being of her kids. Every time Keith begs for forgiveness for his misdeeds and asks Preeti to come along with the kids to his house. For a few days he will be so good and will be back in the days of abuses. One day Keith came drunk to the home disturbed the sleeping kids and sent Preeti out of the house in the bitter cold. At this moment Preeti decided to break off her relationship. This can be seen as, whether the class and religion demands the devotion towards an abusive husband or her disability made her parents think that she can't lead her life alone or fearing of not getting matched with someone.

Naseema was born in Maharashtra in a Muslim family. When she was performing in stage a school program due to an accidental fall of stage she had to suffer spinal injuries. The medical ignorance put her life in complete dark. The spinal injury was not treated right at right time, she was accused of that she is acting over the pain to stop going to school and not to do job in home. The saddest truth was at the end she ended life being in wheel chair as paraplegic lifelong. In the early days of paraplegia, she has suffered in unending pain. That never stopped her working for the disabled community. She got inspiration from Babu Kaka who is also a wheel chair user and has involved in empowering the life of disabled in Karnataka. Naseema is founder of Helpers of the Handicapped which based in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. This organisation helps the disabled community in many ways by providing hostels, vocational training and employment.

Initially when Naseema had a thought of working for the disabled, she had invested even her salary in helping the disabled to make them participate in national and international sports events and for their education. Naseema's prime thought was that no disabled should be left behind the four walls. she always had a thought that a impaired should expose his talents and get placed in jobs for that the right opportunity has to be created. So she started creating it. When she started doing the works for the welfare of disabled she wanted to make it a rehabilitation centre to reach out to more people. If the treatment and rehabilitation was given at the right time, her sufferings and pain could have got little less and physically she could have done much better. Apang PunarvasanS anstha was setup with the prominent faces of Kolhapur, Rajanikarkare, Ranade, Patankar, and Bhosale were the disabled members of the committee and Gokhale, a non disabled member was appointed as secretary and registration works of the organisation was handed over to him. The ultimate shock was she was dropped from the committee and just assigned a job to run the training centre.

Babu kaka was very much shocked to see her name being left out in the committee list. He also asked Naseema, "is it because you're not a Brahmin?"(Hazruk, 2005, p. 66) This one question can be looked in various dimensions in the life of disabled. A woman who was instrumental in forming the center was not in its committee and is just given the role of a trainer. Rajani, who said "that she wouldn't be able to work as hard as me" and Rajani was

here today only because of Naseema's help to her in right time. Was given a opportunity to be in committee but Naseema was left behind. In one way, this can be seen as a woman is not fit to be in the role of organising committee? Or a Muslim women is not fit to be in one with Hindus?. Impaired bodies who are already disabled by the society are again crushed the structures of the society. Naseema proved that her assumptions of male parochial and chauvinistic are completely wrong. She and Rajani organised a sports event in the presence of district collector. For this event she has raised funds and it was in the account of the centre. When she proposed about this in the committee meeting it was rejected. The committee members turned this centre into money making business where welfare and charity kept aside and money has entered in the form of corruption in the center. So she left centre and started the Helpers of the Handicapped

I remember one Diwali day...it was getting dark when suddenly there was hail of stones..the stones came again pelting on the tiled roof of the kitchen... then as the vigil slackened a bit, the stones rained on us. (Hazruk, 2005, p. 36)

These lines express the real scenario of life threat to the religious minority in the nation. In our recent times, the particular set of people is facing threats on their life in the form of lynching and riots. Why does a life of a minority is less valued in the country, in Naseema childhood days, on the festival of Diwali suddenly stones came falling in their home. It continued even when her father came back home from the office during late night. It continued even after the eight days of vigil on the 9th day too. Being born in a minority religion of a nation, one has to survive the threats in daily life. Preeti has not faced any threats in daily life. She has been safe in the hands of her class, her life was messed up in her marriage. Naseema has problems in living her day to day life with the identity of minority. Even your dwelling place is not safe for one. Being Sikh disabled women and Muslim disabled women is not the same thing. It is a state of marginalisation within the oeuvre of marginalization.

Preeti has seen two-faced extremes of religion in her life due to the discrimination of disability. In her education, she was admitted into school and later dismissed for her disability. In her marriage, she was abused by Keith, a drunkard and later found Ashwani as her key to happiness. The rejection, trauma, sufferings and discrimination faced by Preeti are not the depiction of one's own self rather it is a voice and identity of the visually impaired community. Naseema writes about her life how she struggled to be an activist with marginalised identity. She has to survive the daily life threats with disability and rejections in her life because of being a minority. These life narratives have destroyed the socially imposed identity, assumptions and illusions. Through the life narrative, he/she forms her own identity by breaking her limitation of the society and thus becomes a voice. Representation and identity are not of her alone; but the voice of the whole community by and large could be vividly observed in her narrative. This paper could have been an illustration of how religion works differently for an upper class and marginalized disabled women.

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Bio-note

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